

**BELLY DANCING IN NEW ZEALAND:
IDENTITY, HYBRIDITY,
TRANSCULTURE**

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Abstract

This thesis explores ways in which some New Zealanders draw on and negotiate both belly dancing and local cultural norms to construct multiple local and global identities. Drawing upon discourse analysis, post-structuralist and post-colonial theory, it argues that belly dancing outside its cultures of origin has become globalised, with its own synthetic culture arising from complex networks of activities, objects and texts focused around the act of belly dancing. This is demonstrated through analysis of New Zealand newspaper accounts, interviews, focus group discussion, the Oasis Dance Camp belly dance event in Tongariro and the work of fusion belly dance troupe Kiwi Iwi in Christchurch. Bringing New Zealand into the field of belly dance study can offer deeper insights into the processes of globalisation and hybridity, and offers possibilities for examination of the variety of ways in which belly dance is practiced around the world.

The thesis fills a gap in the literature about 'Western' understandings and uses of the dance, which has thus far heavily emphasised the United States and notions of performing as an 'exotic Other'. It also shifts away from a sole focus on representation to analyse participants' experiences of belly dance as dance, rather than only as performative play. The talk of the belly dancers involved in this research demonstrates the complex and contradictory ways in which they articulate ideas about New Zealand identities and cultural conventions. Some of their reflections on belly dancing appear to reflect consciousness of and dis-ease around issues of indigeneity and multiculturalism in wider New Zealand society. Participants in this study also talk about how they explore and perform ideas about femininity, which includes both acceptance and rejection of belly dancing as innately feminine. Looking at New Zealand identities through belly dance, and vice-versa, highlights developing, nuanced and multiple articulations of self and other in a globalised world.

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Dancing on grass at the Brooklands gala: a preamble

I learned to belly dance in a converted Oddfellows Lodge close to the home of Canterbury rugby, Lancaster Park. On certain Saturday nights, the sound of Arabic music, ululating women and finger cymbals competed with the not-too-distant roar of a home crowd. Husbands were known to sneak outside the building with cellphones and radios pressed to their ears, checking the score. The first time I attended one of these events was in 1998, two and a half years after returning to Christchurch from an extended stay in the United Kingdom. My best friend and her small daughter had left London a year before me, and another good mutual friend had just returned home after several years living in Istanbul. Both of these women had been married to Middle Eastern men and remained interested in Middle Eastern cultures. More pragmatically, like many New Zealand women who try belly dance, we were in our 30s, negotiating busy and very different lifestyles and looking for a fun form of exercise that would also ensure we spent time together.

It was not my first experience of belly dancing. I briefly attended a class in Wellington in 1987, as a journalism student. At that time I considered myself a dancer; I had been studying and performing for a year with contemporary dancer Sylvia Forbes in Christchurch, and was fairly fit and flexible. I gave up quickly, being busy with study, but I found the class intriguing, and was impressed by how readily my (much older) classmates showed off heavy, stretch-marked or scarred bodies when dressed in their sparkling costumes. Eleven years later, watching a student-teacher show a few months before I began classes in earnest, I was struck anew by the body confidence all the dancers seemed to demonstrate, and how good they looked, regardless of size or age.

I hadn't attended dance classes for a long time. Although I'd studied ballet in childhood and had enjoyed the contemporary dance classes I took, I was big for a dancer even at my thinnest. Dance in the 1980s was acrobatic; as I grew older, weight gain, lessened physical strength and speed, and the limitations of my always-tight hamstrings and Achilles tendons nipped in the bud any ideas about taking up dance seriously. I began to feel uncomfortable in dance classes. When I started belly dance classes at 33 I experienced a resurgence of feelings I'd

had years back. Yes, I did have some dance ability. Yes, moving my body to music was pleasurable. Yes, this was a dance for which my body type did not matter.

As the years went on my involvement deepened, initially through the Middle Eastern Dance Association of New Zealand (which I joined in 2000) and subsequently as a teacher at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance in Christchurch, where I still teach today. Initially I accepted the stories other belly dancers told: that the dance was traditionally performed only by and for women, that it was very ancient, that it was looked down on in the West, but celebrated in the East. Like many other participants before and after me, I became fitter and more comfortable with my body, and attributed a new sense of emotional well-being to my dancing. I took a performance name, as was traditional at the time. I grew my hair. I attended festivals and master classes, both in New Zealand and internationally. Much of my social life came to revolve around classes and belly dance events, as my friendship networks and dance networks merged. I became embroiled in belly dance politics and began engaging in fierce debate with belly dancers elsewhere in the world on internet message boards. As I learned more about the dance, I learned also to question and recontextualise the stories I had accepted when I first began, especially those presenting belly dance as a natural feminine expression. But I never stopped marvelling at how every time a new round of students presented their first costumed performance, they seemed to blossom. Most would visibly glow with pleasure on the night, laughing and expressing their sense of achievement, and later seemed to exhibit physical confidence that had not been present before. Shy dancers would routinely abandon body stockings and heavy fringe, adopted to cover scars or stretch marks, after performing once or twice. Heavy dancers would begin wearing more fitted clothing to class. Many dancers would also begin expressing their growing confidence with belly dance performance by making suggestions and observations during classes.

What was it about this dance, I wondered, that made us, as New Zealand women, love it and benefit from it so much? Belly dancing seemed such a resolutely un-‘Kiwī’ thing to do. Could this exoticness be the attraction? As I cut my hair off again, began carrying my typical Christchurch all-black fashion preferences into my costuming choices and watched classmates start belly dancing with *poi* to contemporary Māori music, it seemed clear that this was not necessarily so. I was a Kiwi; so was my dancing. My Egyptian-style dance was choreographed by an American, but I was doing it coated in sunblock on a prickly, grassy field at the Brooklands

Gala. Simultaneously, I was a globalised individual, engaging in an activity that women all over the world also enjoyed, and also adapted to their local contexts.

Women who take up belly dance in New Zealand frequently find a route to new ways of experiencing our bodies, new communities, new friendships, new cultural experiences and a new appreciation of the sensual – from bodily movement to the weight of a piece of fabric. Knowing that this was important, and wondering why it felt so important, is the root of this study. I also wished to unpack some of the rather narrow focus on fantasy that I saw in articles I read about belly dancing. After ten years, my fellow dancers and I weren't exactly playing dress-ups any more. Nor were our dance learning experiences still centred almost wholly around one set of classes and video evenings in the converted lodge near Lancaster Park. The networks belly dancers use are broader and thicker now. They incorporate participants in other cities and other countries with which we might engage through travel or on the internet. Multiple sources of information provide participants with much deeper, richer knowledge and greater understanding of the multiple contexts in which belly dancing takes place.

During the final months in which I was writing this thesis, I encountered a visiting Australian psychologist with friends in a bar after class. When he heard I was researching belly dance, he enthusiastically told me that some of his female friends were belly dancers, and that they had told him men had only stopped performing the dance during the 20th century, due to changes in social conventions in the Middle East. This rather specialised information, which undermines popular ideas about belly dance as either ancient women's dance or harem-girl seduction technique, is quite a new concept for belly dancers, so to hear the information from a non-dancer was a pleasant surprise. It seemed to confirm that knowledge flows in new ways and in unexpected directions. Belly dancers no longer trade primarily in myth and fantasy, but in more complex things, which this thesis will explore.

Glossary of terms

The following is a list of key belly dance terms used in this thesis. Secondary definitions, given in brackets, indicate additional ways belly dancers in New Zealand and the USA may use and understand these terms; I include these to demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of talk about belly dance.

American Cabaret: Style of belly dance developed in North American nightclubs during the 1960s, traditionally danced to Arab-American music and featuring heavy use of props (veil, sword, finger cymbals, snake). See also **oriental**.

ATS: American Tribal Style, a contemporary belly dance hybrid (including elements of flamenco) developed in California in the late 1980s by Carolena Neruccio. Always performed in a group. See **tribal**.

***baladi*:** See **raqs baladi**.

***bedleh*:** (Arabic) ornamented bra, belt and skirt costume.

belly dance: Broad term describing “solo dance forms from Morocco to Uzbekistan that engage the hips, torso, arms and hands in undulations, shimmies, circles and spirals,” as well as group and solo dances which are based upon them and demonstrate clear kinaesthetic similarities. See Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young 2005: 1.

cabaret: See **oriental**. (May refer more particularly to the American style.)

***danse orientale*:** literally, Oriental dance (French). See **oriental**.

folkloric: theatricalised versions of ‘authentic’ social or ritual folk dances, in particular those produced by the Reda Troupe and National Folkloric Troupe in Egypt. (Sometimes also used to refer to all folk dances.)

fusion: Usually, belly dance combined with another dance or movement style and/or performed to non-Middle Eastern music.

Hilal dance: a belly dance-contemporary dance hybrid created by UK dancer Suraya Hilal. Formerly known as ***raqs sharqi***.

***indigenous belly dance:** belly dance, both amateur and professional, as practiced in countries where it is culturally normative; for example, parts of North Africa, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq.

***non-indigenous belly dance:** belly dance, both amateur and professional, as practiced in countries where it is perceived as ‘exotic’ or ‘foreign’; for example, the United States of America, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Korea.

oriental:	solo or group belly dance performance styled after professional Middle Eastern belly dance, typically costumed in <i>bedleḥ</i> with veil and performed to orchestrated Middle Eastern music. (Can also be used to refer to American Cabaret style. Sometimes also used broadly as an alternative to belly dance , exclusive of tribal.)
Orientalist dance:	early modern dance on fantasy ‘Eastern’ themes, as performed by dancers like Ruth St Denis and Maud Allan. (Keft-Kennedy 2005)
<i>raqs baladī</i>:	literally, “country dance” (Arabic). The social or non-professional dance style associated with urban working class people of a rural background in Egypt, sometimes viewed as the precursor of <i>raqs sharqī</i> . (Also a theatrical dance emulating this style or, as <i>baladī</i> , an individual professional dancer’s characteristic style; for example, Egyptian professional dancer Fifi Abdo is viewed as ‘ <i>baladī</i> ’ because of both her movement quality and her working class urban background. Also, a variant of Hilal dance.)
<i>raqs sharqī</i>:	literally, “Eastern (or Oriental) dance” (Arabic). Solo belly dance performance in a Middle Eastern style, particularly Egyptian. Outside the Middle East, can also refer to an earlier version of Hilal dance, particularly in the UK.
shimmy:	a rapid vibration, usually of the hips or shoulders.
tribal:	Broad term describing derivatives of San Francisco dancer Jamila Salimpour’s North African/Middle Eastern-styled belly dance, then referred to as ‘ethnic’ to distinguish it from dance performed in nightclubs, and heavily influenced by the aesthetics of <i>National Geographic</i> and the late 1960s hippie scene. Traditionally performed to acoustic Middle Eastern folk music but any music may be used. American Tribal Style is the most established variant.
tribal fusion:	Broad term describing developments out of tribal dance (usually ATS) which incorporate elements of other kinds of belly dance and other dance styles (including urban styles like hip hop), and may be performed solo. Also initially developed in the United States.
ummi:	small internal rotation of the pelvis.
zills:	finger cymbals, also known as sagat.

* These terms are specific to this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

There is perhaps no figure that more powerfully signifies the Other than the belly dancer. Throughout the 20th century, as North American and European fascination with “Eastern exoticism” and desire for an explicitly feminine means of self-expression crystallised, “the [Oriental] dancing body became an object of alterity” through which Western women, by adopting ‘exotic’ costumes and movement vocabularies, aimed to articulate essential selves (Dox 1997: 151). In the first decade of the 21st century, the belly dancer continues to signify alterity, but as the dance form has spread around the world, it has become a site for more complex articulations of self. When Christchurch belly dance troupe Kiwi Iwi fuse Middle Eastern, North American, Latin, Maori and Rarotongan dance movements to interpret a contemporary Maori *baka*, for instance, they present a fluid, multicultural vision of New Zealand as participant in global culture, while ultimately asserting their commitment to a Pacific identity. Other New Zealand belly dancers who operate within the traditional conventions of the dance form may negotiate both performance of cultural alterity and an expression of a locally-situated self. For all participants, the incorporation of belly dance movements into their wider movement repertoire blurs boundaries between performance and individual self-expression, ‘exotic Other’ and ‘personal identity.’

This project explores the development of belly dance in New Zealand, and its use and popularity among New Zealand women. While its origins are in the Middle East, belly dancing has become a globalised practice, studied and performed primarily by women in countries as diverse as the United States, Russia, Japan, and New Zealand. An examination of the ways that New Zealand practitioners engage with belly dance and reinterpret it in relation to their identities as New Zealanders can give us more nuanced insights into the processes of transculturation and the production of identity in a globalised age. This project will also enrich the literature on belly dance outside its originating cultures, which thus far has focused heavily on the United States and on notions of performing as an ‘exotic Other.’ I have used a

qualitative, transdisciplinary research approach to gather data about how belly dance is practiced and experienced in New Zealand, using personal interviews, participant observation, a focus group and analysis of my own belly dance practice, along with particular attention to theories surrounding hybridity, critical transculturalism, gender and the body. I have also drawn extensively on my own insider/outsider status as a New Zealand teacher and practitioner of belly dance. This research looks at the experiences of New Zealanders, and the powerful role of the United States in constructing how belly dance is learned and performed outside its originating countries. The emphasis is on the experiences of New Zealand women who belly dance, although a small number of New Zealand men are also involved in the dance form.

Belly dance is a term generally used to describe a particular kind of solo Middle Eastern social dance, usually performed by women, which has been developed into a performance art both within and outside of the Middle East. In this project, I follow Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (2005: 1) in a broader use of the term, denoting “all solo dance forms from Morocco to Uzbekistan that engage the hips, torso, arms and hands in undulations, shimmies, circles and spirals,” along with group and solo dances based upon them that demonstrate clear kinaesthetic similarities. This is because in New Zealand, as in the United States, the term ‘belly dance’ can include a much larger group of dances, including tribal, which is not Middle Eastern at all.¹ Following Marwan Kraidy’s (2005) model of critical transculturalism, which holds that all culture is hybrid, I view all belly dance as hybrid, and do not consider any form more ‘authentic’ than another. However, I make a distinction between what I call ‘globalised’ belly dance and ‘indigenous’ belly dance. In this thesis, ‘indigenous belly dance’ means belly dance practiced in countries where it is culturally normative, primarily the Middle East and parts of North Africa. I use this term where possible in preference to ‘Middle Eastern’ or ‘Arabic’ because using such terms inevitably excludes some practitioners under Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young’s definition of belly dance. I also find it ethically imperative to acknowledge a greater claim for ownership among cultures where the dance is indigenously practiced and perceived as a local cultural expression, in line with Kraidy’s insistence on recognition of power inequalities within a hybrid model of globalisation and my own cultural positioning as a New Zealand Pakeha woman of Irish heritage.²

¹ For example, trance dances and regional dances, along with theatricalised folkloric dance, may be classified as ‘belly dance’ by participants outside their originating countries, but indigenous practitioners may be more likely to identify only *raqs sharqi* as belly dance. Tribal belly dance originates in North America.

² As the daughter of a Roman Catholic migrant from Northern Ireland, I have had lifelong consciousness of the class and ethnicity-based inequalities to which my father and his family were subject in their native country. As a 21st century Pakeha,

In this introductory chapter, I will engage with the current debates in the field of belly dance and the ways in which other writers have constructed belly dance as a means of exploring identity. Through discussing the development outside its indigenous contexts, and the effects local cultures have on this globalised product, I will engage with and in some cases problematise the literature around non-indigenous belly dance. I will argue that it is important to consider belly dancing as both globalised and indigenous, rather than comparing ‘Western’ (or ‘American’) and ‘Eastern’ belly dance, and will demonstrate the key distinctions and interactions between these forms. I will also argue that a hybrid notion of belly dance resonates with new analysis of identity as hybridity and flow.

I approach both globalisation and identity via a hybridity model and a critical transculturalist position. Critical transculturalism views all cultures as inherently hybrid or mixed, but also recognises the effects of power inequity; it “integrates both discursive and politico-economic analysis” and aims to understand hybridity at a social, not individual, level (Kraidy 2005: 14). Kraidy’s “contrapuntal” approach to hybridity allows a focus on links between institutions, texts and experiences, while keeping the idea of hybridity as a unifying element; it stresses the role of exchanges between participating entities, which enables a more complete analysis; it takes into account broader societal contexts; and (most crucially) focuses on “complex processes at play” to move beyond “bipolar models” of global/local, power/resistance, imperialism/hybridity (2005: 13). This emphasis on multiplicity and processes at play is particularly appropriate for looking at belly dance in its globalised form. It also parallels my preferred mode of looking at identity. An element of masquerade is significant within globalised belly dance, and the uncomfortable evocation of racial inequality underlying white women’s performances as exotic Others cannot be ignored. However, examining identity within globalised belly dance needs also to consider social, geographic and temporal factors, and the effects of participating in the dance on the material body.

Defining the field: fantasy, the Orient and the body

There has been little serious scholarly attention paid to non-indigenous belly dance until recently. Most writing about the dance has been produced by and for belly dancers, and

with three generations of ancestors in New Zealand on my mother’s side, who grew up during the 1970s and 1980s ‘Maori Renaissance’ period, I am also conscious of the degree to which my personal privilege has basis in ethnicity-based inequalities and the marginalisation of New Zealand’s indigenous peoples. These factors play a key role in shaping my personal commitment both to indigenous rights and recognition of cultural complexities.

published in journals (the now-defunct *Habibi*), along with magazines, websites and books that are not generally identified as scholarly, although some of the authors are scholars in other fields (for example, Andrea Deagon³(1997), Laurel Victoria Gray (2000)). Some of these authors have devoted much of their lives to ethnographic research of indigenous belly dance (particularly Morocco (1996), Aisha Ali (1979)). These articles tend to focus specifically on history, context, movement description and sometimes analysis of the dance as a spiritual practice, but seldom draw on critical theory. Shay and Sellers-Young (2003: 15-16) note that belly dance falls into the realm of popular culture; in the Middle East, most people consider it entertainment rather than an art form, which is why there is little historical indigenous writing about it. (This is also partially why this research has drawn upon popular resources as well as scholarly ones.)

More recently, some scholars with personal involvement in belly dance have turned to critical analysis, focusing very much on the roles of fantasy and representation. For Shay and Sellers-Young (2003) and Donnalee Dox (2006), Western women who belly dance ‘find themselves’ by impersonating an exotic Other – specifically, a Middle Eastern Other. This can be liberating, particularly, as Virginia Keft-Kennedy (2005) observes, when combined with a transgressive show of seemingly uncontrolled, moving flesh, but, as Edward Said (1978/2003) would doubtless point out, has problematic resonances of racial inequality and cultural appropriation. Some feminists, like Jan Wright and Shoshana Dreyfus (1998), who are not belly dancers, also express discomfort with the heteronormative performativity that imbues the personal satisfaction and pleasure of belly dancing for female participants. Wright and Dreyfus’ analysis suffers, however, from its authors’ lack of in-depth understanding of the norms of belly dance practice, and their failure to examine the wider discourses that shape both participants’ and their own responses to belly dance, most particularly Orientalism.

Ideas about belly dancing have been powerfully informed by Orientalist discourse, both in Western cultures and in the Middle East itself. As Anthony Shay (2002: 132) pertinently observes, Orientalism’s positioning of the Orient as inferior is reflected in the 20th century Egyptian urban elite’s rejection, under British colonial rule, of “authentic traditional performance” in favour of Westernised fantasy versions of their own local dances, such as those produced by Mahmoud Reda. However, as Edward Said (1978/2003) and Stavros

³ Deagon, who is from the United States, taught classics at Victoria University in Wellington during the mid 1980s and also taught belly dance classes at that time.

Stavrou Karayanni (2004: 162) would doubtless argue, Shay's stance here also inadvertently perpetuates a neo-colonialist ideology that permits the Orient only to provide inspiration, not produce art forms of its own. Karayanni (2004: 161) perceptively notes that many members of the North American belly dance community (of which Shay is part) "assume the hegemonic role of emissaries who perpetuate, embellish and safeguard [the dance's] survival," placing their desire for an 'authentic' unchanging Orient ahead of hybrid, contemporary Egyptian creativity and innovation. The images and fantasies attached to the 'mysterious East', which Said identifies as latent Orientalism and which Turkish feminist scholar Meyda Yegenoglu (1998: 11) uses to explore how the Orient is constructed for Westerners as an object of desire, are particularly significant when examining Western responses to belly dance.⁴ "Unconscious desires and fantasies of the 'other' and 'otherness'," and particularly the image of the Oriental woman, whose mystery and exoticism reflect 19th century ideas of the Orient as "feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous," are always mapped onto the figure of the belly dancer (ibid).

Orientalist fantasy also underlies a set of popular discourses which have historically repositioned belly dance as an activity suited not just to exotic Others but to 'all' women, and from which 'all' women – read, white Western women – can benefit. Participants in globalised belly dancing may draw on a variety of pervasive, appealing myths and fantasies that celebrate a powerful feminine (Oriental) spirituality and sexuality, circulated via popular books, websites and word of mouth. These myths and fantasies form a kind of meta-narrative which positions belly dance as an ancient women's fertility dance, suppressed and/or degraded by the rise of patriarchal religions, which is uniquely suited to the female body and taps into a kind of universal femininity (Al-Rawi 1999; Buonaventura 1983, 1989). This narrative is powerfully expressed in the title of Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi's (1999) popular book *Grandmother's Secrets: the ancient rituals and healing power of belly dance* and will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Shay and Sellers-Young (2003: 10-11), without dismissing the problems inherent in Orientalism, observe that fantasies of antiquity and Goddess worship may "lend dignity" to the dance for Western participants. Dox (2006: 53) notes that belly dancers treat some of these fantasies, particularly those surrounding the veil and the harem, as alternatives to Western patriarchy, materialism and logocentrism. The harem fantasy celebrates universal femininity

⁴ An examination of the role of Orientalist discourses for globalised belly dancers in countries outside those conventionally deemed 'Western' is outside the scope of this thesis, but would certainly merit further examination.

through feminine community, achieved by dancing with and for other women away from the prying eyes of men. It recasts gender-segregated space, “which Western liberal values would otherwise cast as repressive,” as a “conceptual alternative to Western patriarchy” and reverses the usual Orientalist notion of the harem as backward. The unproblematic display of these women’s dancing bodies, however, is itself a product of ‘Western’ cultural values (ibid: 56). Dox’s (2006: 58) observations that “the masquerade of the Eastern Other... is central to [Western dancers’] sense of empowerment” echo Yegenoglu’s assertion that Western subjects use Orientalist fantasy to secure an identity for themselves, mediated by the Other. Yegenoglu considers that Western women’s fantasies of penetrating the harem and of enacting a universal pre-patriarchal femininity stem from the desire to see, and thus to know and control, the Other (1998: 26). Because women may only access the benefits of ‘universal’ ideas through Enlightenment ideas of the individual as “rational, universal and male,” in Yegenoglu’s terms these belly dancers are thus made to view the Oriental Other, and to desire to perform as her, from a masculine position (ibid : 106).

Virginia Keft-Kennedy (2005: 289-290), unpacking early modern dancers’ neutralisation of the “racial and sexual threat” of “grotesque” indigenous Middle Eastern dance through Orientalist masquerade, sees belly dance for Western women as inherently “ideologically unstable, always risking a dangerous overlap between the cultural otherness of the ‘Orient’ and the supposedly secure construction of gender in the West.” For Keft-Kennedy (2005: 295), belly dance becomes transgressive in contemporary Western societies because it projects an “appropriately feminine” body while simultaneously rejecting the cultural insistence - as outlined by Susan Bordo (1993) - that such a body be constrained, and not “wiggle.” Both Keft-Kennedy and Stavros Stavrou Karayanni (2004) observe the role of costuming and makeup in creating a spectacle of transgressive performativity while simultaneously deflecting observation. Two-piece costumes reveal the belly, but the dancer can simultaneously “rebuff, refocus and reorient the gaze” by isolating body parts (and therefore directing where the viewer looks) when dancing (Karayanni 2004: 75). Karayanni notes also that dancers’ elaborate eye-makeup and body adornment, while inviting admiration, “practice a choreographed intervention on the natural body” by denying the viewer access to the ‘real’ body of the subject beneath (ibid : 89). Shay and Sellers-Young (2003: 32) also acknowledge the role of masquerade or mimicry when they suggest belly dancers’ fantasies may be pervasive simply because they are “fun in a theatrical way, like dressing up for Halloween.” These writers position belly dance as resistance from within a spectacular, masquerading body, a form of resistance that may be appealing to

women from outside Middle Eastern cultures, but a potentially problematic one because of the racist undertones inherent in imitating an exotic 'Other'.

It is testament to belly dance's complex entanglement in concepts of culture, gender, race and representation that so little critical analysis has been done of it as dance. Although reports about experiencing a sense of physical well-being and body acceptance through belly dance have been noted (see, for example, Wright & Dreyfus 1998), few researchers have paid significant attention to belly dancers' experiences of the sensation of belly dancing, or how its movements become part of their bodily repertoire. Concern for the material body and how it relates to identity must be at the heart of a study of belly dance, given the physical nature of the activity. There has also been little attention paid to what happens when belly dancing ceases to be novel and exotic, and becomes part of what dance sociologist Helen Thomas (2003: 118) , following Pierre Bourdieu, might call a participant's dance habitus. While representation cannot be completely bypassed in any discussion of belly dancing, this thesis will take into account the embodied experiences of the belly dancers who participated. This will mean paying attention to how they described the physical experience of belly dancing and its effect on them, as well as the discourses through which they construct belly dance and their bodies within belly dance.

As we have seen, one such discourse is that of universal femininity through feminine communion, or the harem fantasy. Another, which is particularly pertinent for this thesis, is the myth of the gypsy trail. This comparatively unexplored (but popular) discourse posits that belly dance was transmitted by ancient gypsy tribes who added new movements and applications from the various cultures they encountered (see Buonaventura 1989: 39-40). The gypsy trail model offers participants an appealing transcultural model in which belly dance is viewed as an inherently hybrid, creative phenomenon, therefore avoiding criticisms of cultural appropriation of an indigenous dance form. It may have particular resonance for belly dancers operating in a fragmented, postmodern and globalised environment. In the next sections of this chapter, I will examine the ways some writers have explored belly dance as a transcultural hybrid, and outline my concept of a globalised belly dance culture.

Moving towards a globalised model of belly dance

A distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous belly dance has been discussed elsewhere, but mostly with a focus on the United States. For Barbara Sellers-Young (1992: 141),

“*raqs sharqi*” in the United States is not “a replication of the form in the Middle East” but a method for women to explore their sensuality and sense of feminine power, derived from two factors: romanticised views of the region of origin and a growing awareness and acceptance of the female body. She sees it as bearing “little or no resemblance” to indigenous belly dance, pointing out that belly dancers in North America combine steps from different areas to create a new hybrid medium, and perform in different contexts, namely restaurants and theatres (ibid : 144). This position, informed by both the neocolonialist attitude Karayanni (2004) identifies in North American belly dance, and participants’ understanding of the globalisation process and the American history of the dance, allows some ‘experts’ to deem ‘belly dance’ Western in and of itself. Julie Fisher (2003), for example, argues that ‘belly dance’ is an American construction, loosely inspired by but very different from the traditional dances of the Middle East, and profoundly informed by Orientalist fantasies. Fisher rightly identifies differences between the way women’s solo dance is learned and performed in the Middle East and in the United States, and asserts that the United States has played a significant role in how it is transmitted and performed in the wider world. However, her identification of ‘belly dance’ as ‘American’ is near-sighted and overly simplistic. In particular, her assertion that Egyptians adopted sexy costumes and greater use of floor space via 1920s Hollywood movies ignores British and Russian⁵ cultural influences on Cairo’s entertainment industry during the 1920s-50s. Sellers-Young (1992: 144) acknowledges an “increased interchange” between dancers in the United States and the Middle East, but does not touch on the rise in popularity of ‘authentic’ Egyptian style belly dance, probably because her article predates the trend.⁶

Both writers effectively place ‘belly dance’ – the North American hybrid – in opposition to ‘*raqs sharqi*’ – the ‘authentic’ original - in a way that I find problematic. Firstly, the term ‘belly dance’ is not exclusively North American and does not solely describe North American variants – it is a direct translation of the French *danse du ventre*, commonly used and understood by Western and non-Western people all over the world,⁷ as well as by Middle Eastern people when describing the dance in English. Secondly, ‘Western’ belly dance is not (or is no longer) simply a

⁵ The Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova performed in Cairo in 1923; the Russian dancer Ivanova is said to have taught both Samia Gamal and Tahia Carioca during the 1940s.

⁶ Shareen el Safy, one of the main North American dancers credited with popularising modern Egyptian style, returned to the USA in 1992 after several years working in Egypt, which is also the year she became editor in chief and publisher of *Habibi*. Another influential Egyptian style North American dancer, Sahra C Kent (aka Sahra Saeeda), returned in 1995. Both women subsequently taught workshops in this style in the USA and globally.

⁷ For instance, Germans refer to the dance as *bauchtanz*, which also translates as ‘belly dance’.

fantasy about or an imitation of Middle Eastern dance, but involves ongoing engagement with evolving indigenous practice. New hybrids (particularly tribal fusion) may neither strongly evoke the Orient nor claim strong indigenous roots. Similarly, indigenous belly dance in the Middle East is not static, and is subject to ongoing influences from other dance styles and other places. The different cultural contexts in which these dances are performed also influence how participants and audiences experience them. Belly dance itself is thus always culturally hybrid regardless of where it is, and reflects the idiosyncratic location and viewpoints of the people doing it and watching it, be they Egyptian, Chinese or New Zealanders.

Asserting that ‘belly dance’ and its derivatives are an American fantasy, while ‘Middle Eastern dance’ is something else, thus gives non-indigenous dancers agency to use the form for their personal creative purposes. However, the image of the belly dancer is so powerfully representative of the ‘Orient,’ and thus the Middle East, that the two cannot readily be severed; belly dancers may come to represent the Middle East whether they like it or not. Conversely, when dancers aim to represent the Middle East ‘authentically,’ particularly through efforts to preserve indigenous belly dance in the face of globalisation ‘over there’ and encroaching hybridity ‘at home,’ they risk taking a paternalistic position towards the dance form and stifling creativity (Goodyear 2007a). Laura Osweiler’s (2005) examination of the ways “American-Middle Eastern dancers” may “critique and expose” the workings of traditional Middle Eastern dance by bringing “instability and mutation into its ‘hidden’ sedimentation processes” is interesting, not only because of the author’s use of critical theory (Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), but because it attempts to bring these two positions together. For Osweiler, “experimental” explorations of traditional dances, which “construct lines back into traditional Middle Eastern dance” and thus refuse to be opposed to it, provide participants “with agency and choice” unregulated or determined by the rules and concepts produced by practice, repetition and teaching. Osweiler’s insights are limited, as she writes only of United States belly dance community contexts.⁸ She considers neither the implications of Orientalism, particularly regarding representation, nor belly dance’s wider cultural meanings within and outside the United States. She gives only American belly dancers, not Middle Eastern people, agency over what is, and what is not, to be termed “Middle Eastern dance.” However, Osweiler makes an important contribution to analysis of belly dance in her recognition of the constructed nature of

⁸ Osweiler, as Amara, is the creator of the somewhat controversial annual event, “An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance,” and her frustrations with her local belly dance community’s traditionalist responses to it are quite evident throughout this paper.

‘tradition’ and her refusal to place experimental and traditional approaches in opposition to each other. She prefers instead a Deleuzian rhizomic model in which the connections between these dances may produce a “space for difference and otherness.” This resonates with a notion of belly dance as hybrid, globalised practice, an analysis I will develop in this thesis through a discussion of belly dance in the New Zealand context.

Belly dance as globalised practice

Like other non-indigenous participants in the dance form, New Zealand belly dancers do more than dance. They engage with a globalised belly dance ‘culture’ with its own shared mythologies, traditions and forms of cultural capital, which responds to and is pervaded by larger “circuits of power” (as Kraidy puts it) including global tourism, commerce and politics (2005: 155). Globalised belly dance culture, which I argue may operate on participants as if it were a material, geographically-located culture, draws on real and imagined elements of Middle Eastern/North African cultures, as well as aspects of the culture(s) in which the individual belly dance community is based. As Helen Thomas (2003: 80) observes, the “theatrical significance of [a] dance element” – in other words, its culturally specific meaning - can only be understood in relation to the entire movement system from which it springs. For dance ethnographer Deirdre Sklar (1991/2001: 30), dance must be looked at as “an embodiment of cultural knowledge, a kinaesthetic equivalent... to using the local language.” Thus, just as indigenous belly dance needs to be considered not simply as a movement-based activity, but in terms of its role and wider meanings within its cultures of origin – as a kind of cultural expression - so belly dancing that takes place outside these cultures must also be considered in relation to its cultural context. Non-indigenous belly dancers’ experiences of watching, learning and performing belly dance will be informed both by the norms and expectations of their own cultures, and by those of globalised belly dance culture itself.

The analysis of globalised belly dance offered in this thesis draws not only on reviews of academic and popular literature, and original research, but on my own experiences as a belly dancer in New Zealand over the past ten years. In the following section, I outline the features of globalised belly dance and demonstrate the key ways in which it differs from, yet intersects with, indigenous belly dance.

The term 'globalised belly dance' describes belly dance primarily as it has developed outside the cultures in which it originated. This model is preferable to one that considers such belly dance practice as 'Western' for a number of reasons. The first is simply that belly dance outside the Middle East/North Africa is now practiced in countries not generally thought of as part of the West, including Japan, China, Korea, Russia and South America. This approach also allows me to problematise the concept of Western homogeneity. To do so is important because positioning all 'Western' nations and peoples as part of one large colonising force with one way of thinking about things ignores significant social and historical (not to mention linguistic) differences between individual cultures deemed 'Western,' as well as social differences that exist within those cultures. New Zealand culture is not the same as North American culture. Thirdly, a notion of 'globalised' belly dance rather than 'Western' belly dance implies a space wherein transcultural exchange may flow in multiple directions. This acknowledges the ongoing, active participation of Middle Eastern and North African people, rather than restricting their involvement to 'inspiration,' and also allows us to view non-indigenous participants as creative rather than solely imitative or appropriative.

Kraidy (2005: 13) defines hybridity as a "discursive formation", a concept he borrows from Michel Foucault to describe a "system of dispersion" where one can define a regularity... between objects, types of statements, concepts or thematic choices." Globalised belly dance can similarly be looked at as a discursive formation, loosely structured by certain shared beliefs, ideas and practices, but not monolithic or immutable. The shared concepts and practices of globalised belly dance culture appear to have been largely determined by the concepts and practices adopted by belly dancers in the United States from the 1970s onwards, disseminated and perpetuated globally as a "commodity fetish" through complex networks that include books, websites, teaching strategies and commercial transactions (Sellers-Young 2005: 300). Globalised belly dance may thus also be seen as an example of what has been referred to as 'McDonaldisation.' Douglas Kellner articulates 'McDonaldisation' as "a cultural pedagogy and an ideology as well as a set of social practices... a cultural construct with its own myths, semiotic codes, discourses and set of transformative practices" which "articulates with local cultures and traditions" to provide consumers - we may say participants - with "their own meaningful experiences" (Kellner 2003: 38-39). However, globalised belly dance is not driven by a single corporate agency but is rather a product of intersecting ideas, images and fantasies which, while they are profoundly influenced by United States-based participants, are not solely produced or controlled by them. It is transcultural rather than imperialist or international; as

Kraidy (2005: 14) observes, the prefix ‘trans’ suggests “moving through spaces and across borders,” a quality of movement that does not travel one way, or even two ways, but in and from multiple directions, creating a new synthetic culture in which strands of multiple disparate cultures intertwine and multiple processes operate.

Participants outside the United States may thus engage with globalised belly dance in ways that are consistent with their own cultural values, and may have their own effect on the ways globalised belly dance culture operates. For example, some belly dancers in the Middle East (most notably Egypt) have begun actively courting the international belly dance market, both for financial gain and, sometimes, to assert some control over the transmission of a dance they claim as culturally theirs (Senkovich 2006).⁹ This has led both to the creation of two major belly dance festivals in Egypt, and to the growth of international workshop circuits on which star dancers (often retired) share their knowledge. Similarly, the development in North America of tribal and tribal fusion genres, which are generally identified as specifically Western and contemporary, have provided an opportunity for some New Zealand belly dancers, such as Christchurch tribal fusion troupe Kiwi Iwi,¹⁰ to explore ideas about resistance and localised identity. To stretch Homi K Bhabha’s (1996: 58) concept of hybridity, participants in belly dance’s globalised form may “deploy [its] partial culture... to construct visions of community ... that give narrative form to the ... positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole.” These actors do not necessarily “emerge” from belly dance – rather, they step into it from whatever positions they occupy in their own wider culture - and it would be fatuous to equate their engagement in this activity with the experiences of marginalised peoples. However, long-term involvement with belly dancing may come to re-produce participants, both discursively, since they engage with a variety of discourses that centre on the dance and its contexts, and through use of a formerly-unfamiliar movement vocabulary. The regularly-reported benefits of belly dancing to women, who may identify themselves as occupying marginal positions in the wider social contexts in which they are located, emerge from this re-production.

⁹ “It is much less from here now. It is more in Europe, America and Japan. It is spreading out more, and I’m very happy with that, but I’m sad that this is my heritage and my name. It is named Eastern dancing. I’m sad that there aren’t too many dancers left.” Egyptian belly dancer Lucy, interviewed in *The Bellydancers of Cairo*, 2006.

¹⁰ A detailed discussion of the work of Kiwi Iwi will be found in Chapter 5.

Globalised belly dance demonstrates its transcultural nature primarily in the way that it blends Middle Eastern, North American and local cultural concepts. Firstly, globalised belly dance takes its cue from North America in its use of structured classes, specialist workshops, costumed performances, and the development of social activities related to belly dance. Middle Eastern cultural elements may be filtered through an Orientalist lens, as in harem fantasies and the use of veils. Others are more direct adaptations of Middle Eastern traditions, probably adopted during the early interaction between white North American dancers and Middle Eastern migrant communities. These may include using *zaghareet* (ululations) to express approval, the Arabic word *hafla* (party) to describe a gathering for belly dancers at which dancing will take place, or the high cultural capital attached to a dancer's musicality and apparent understanding of Arabic lyrics. It is at the local level that variations specific to each locality may appear, in response to geographic, demographic and cultural differences between locations. A belly dance *hafla* will almost always include planned dance performances (unlike a Middle Eastern *hafla*, where, as at any party, people might dance, but are under no obligation to). However, the precise details – the degree of formality, the kind of food served (Middle Eastern or local, catered or home-made), the dances presented (traditional, fusion, improvised, choreographed), the physical location (community hall, garage, beach front, nightclub) – reflect local conventions.

Globalised belly dance is further distinguished from indigenous belly dance in the following key ways.

1) Globalised belly dance is institutionalised and culturally marked. Belly dance for the globalised participant centres on structured classes and formal performances. Most participants begin to learn the dance as adults, sometimes with no prior dance experience at all. This is markedly different to the experiences of indigenous participants, who typically learn from childhood by copying adult family members and who may never take a formal lesson.¹¹ Indigenous belly dance is culturally normative; although some individuals dislike it or do not dance themselves, belly dancing, both amateur and professional, is unremarkable at social gatherings, celebrations or formal places of entertainment. Conversely, globalised belly dance

¹¹ Professional belly dancers in the Middle East sometimes take lessons to increase their repertoire or refine their technique, but are not taught the fundamental movements of belly dance because it is assumed they already know them. At a Brisbane workshop in 2005, founding Reda Company member Dr Mo Geddawi exhorted Australasian participants to “manipulate” his footwork combinations, meaning add undulations, shimmies, circles or timing changes to suit their personal taste. It seemed that Egyptian dancers would do this as a matter of course.

never becomes a completely unmarked, everyday activity no matter how long or how regularly a participant practices it, because it is not recognised as part of the wider local culture.¹² Amateur participants therefore tend to create formal or semi-formal social events for belly dancing, such as festivals, recitals and *haflas*, rather than perform the dance normatively at gatherings where there are no other belly dancers present.

2) Globalised belly dance practice emphasises structure, performance and professionalism. Indigenous belly dance is solo and improvised, typically a spontaneous, embodied response to the music, which may therefore never be repeated identically. Dancing with a group of relatives or friends is treated more as “lighthearted play” than performance (Adra 2005: 41). Dancing outside settings deemed “intimate” (i.e. gatherings involving relatives and friends) is frowned upon, regardless of how talented the dancer (Adra 2005: 35). Although professional belly dancers remain popular entertainers and may even achieve celebrity status, dancing is generally seen as undesirable, low-class employment. Costumed performance for money does not automatically mean a dancer is exceptionally skilled, only that she is prepared to do the job (van Nieuwkerk 1995). In contrast, participation in costumed performances in front of an audience, as if professional, is a major facet of globalised belly dance. Dancers with skill are generally encouraged to aim for a paid professional career, if opportunities exist. Indigenous-style solo improvisation exists in globalised belly dance but choreography is also used, and among amateurs, group performance is probably more common than solo dance. Choreography lends group performances structure; in the case of improvised tribal dance, a predetermined system of cues and movement combinations is used.

3) Globalised belly dance codifies movements and dance styles. While individuals may observe variations in the dances performed by professionals from different cultures, in general there is less emphasis on such codification and more on personal expression in indigenous belly dance. “*Raqs sharqi* is *raqs sharqi*, it doesn’t have different styles.... We all do one *raqs sharqi*, whether I’m from Iraq or Egypt or Lebanon or Jordan.”¹³ Globalised dancers are more likely to identify with and study one or more ‘styles’ (classical Egyptian, Lebanese, tribal fusion) and to codify movements in terms of perceived region or people of origin (‘Tunisian twist step’, ‘Ghawazee stomp’), or kinaesthetic quality (‘figure eight’). These

¹² Thus, North American innovations cannot be classed as a form of indigenous belly dance, because they are not habitually practiced or understood by most North Americans and are not perceived as representative of United States culture.

¹³ AJ, personal interview, April 21st 2008.

movements are then strung together in combinations or a choreographed routine (see also Dox 2006: 53).

4) Globalised belly dance centres around the circulation of commodities and wider transcultural networking. The purchase of goods and services is an increasingly significant feature of globalised belly dance. Amateur dancers purchase performance and training DVDs, music, costume items, specialised classwear (such as hipscarves) and accessories, and sell them to other dancers when they are tired of them. Professional dancers, usually from Western countries (such as the United States, Canada and Australia) may produce and sell specialised teaching DVDs, in addition to teaching classes and workshops in person.¹⁴ International tours, special events in a variety of countries and the popularity of online shopping means more participants engage with dancers, costumiers and musicians who live in different countries.

I will further discuss and analyse the ways globalised belly dance plays out in the New Zealand context in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. This includes not just attention to the dance as a transcultural practice, but to the ways that participants in this study talked about belly dancing in relation to identity.

Global identities

Critical transculturalism examines hybridity at the social, not the individual level, but looking at globalised belly dance also allows us to explore the notion of hybridity in relation to individual identity. The New Zealand women who participated in this study seemed to have little difficulty identifying their dancing as hybrid (or ‘fusion’), relating this to their self-identification as New Zealanders (or ‘Kiwis’) and their geographic and temporal location in 21st century New Zealand. Extending notions of hybridity onto identity also acknowledges firstly that identity is created in complex and multiple ways – that, in Bhabha’s (1996: 54) terms, a ‘Kiwī’ identity might occupy “the contaminated and connective tissue” between the multiple social, cultural and historical elements that structure New Zealand society, both on its own shores and in the wider global context. Although Bhabha’s word ‘contamination’ is problematic,

¹⁴ Compilations of belly dance footage are available in Middle Eastern countries, but do not appear to be produced specifically for other belly dancers. They are readily available for tourists to purchase, but also seem to be produced with locals in mind, since they are usually labelled only in Arabic. Their content is very varied and most of the ones I have seen appear pirated.

due to the suggestion of a corresponding 'pure' or 'authentic' culture, by using this model we can identify how a New Zealand belly dancer's identity thus 'contaminates,' or affects, and 'is contaminated' or affected by her engagement with globalised belly dance culture. While for some of the dancers who participated in this study, belly dancing simply reflected a pre-existing concept of themselves as a dancer or performer and was unrelated, according to their reports, to fantasies about alternate selves or otherness, several participants echoed Elspeth Probyn's (1993: 106) concept of a self that is "a theoretical manoeuvring, not a unifying principle." These participants identified "the belly dancer" as one of multiple personae with which they identified and on which they could draw; the belly dancer was figured as a performed identity, which subsequently became part of a more complex and confident 'self'.

Elspeth Probyn is one of numerous feminists who have turned to the insights of philosopher Gilles Deleuze to explore new possibilities for feminine identity. While this thesis will not engage directly with Deleuze, Deleuzian feminism's liberatory notion of identities in flux presents intriguing possibilities for looking at belly dance. Facility with belly dance may allow a dancer to inhabit her own body in a way consistent with Deleuzian feminist thinking – she may enjoy firstly a sense of femininity that is not "a symptom, effect or product of patriarchal culture" but "an intensity exerting its own force" which does not need to resist oppressive constructs of femininity or reveal true ones, because it does not acknowledge these binaries (Markula 2006: 12-13). Much like dance sociologist Pirkko Markula (2006: 24), who has experimented with applying a Deleuzian feminist model to her contemporary dance practice, I have found that thinking of dance performance and feminine identity in terms of flow provides fresh insights, but it remains difficult to divorce oneself from "the looks of the body" and thus consciousness of a gaze. While many dancers who participated in this study spoke of their pleasure in the act of dancing (as I will elaborate in Chapter 4), they mostly also seemed to derive as much pleasure from performance, and in particular, the performance of a highly exaggerated style of femininity. To explore this I will (following dance scholar Susan Kozel (1997)) draw on Luce Irigaray's concept of mimicry, whose fluidity, challenge to dualistic structures and capacity "to make visible ... what was supposed to remain invisible" is achieved, perversely, through the "playful repetition" of the feminine role (Irigaray 1985: 76).

In the following chapter, I will outline the methodology used to research this thesis. This will include the methods and rationales of resource selection, participant recruitment and interviewing, along with attention to the limitations and possibilities produced by my insider-outsider research status.

In Chapter 3, I will further explore the underlying discourses that contribute to the ways belly dance has been constructed outside the Middle East as it has developed into a globalised phenomenon, including an examination of how these discourses contribute to ways that women can construct ideas about feminine identities. This chapter will also include a partial history of belly dance in the United States, and later New Zealand, during the 20th and 21st centuries, with attention also to the dance's development in Egypt during this period, and an overview of ways some New Zealand participants have interacted with globalised belly dance culture.

Chapter 4 will pay particular attention to New Zealand dancers' responses to belly dance and embodiment. This will include an examination of the ways that research participants talked about their belly dance as a habitual practice rather than solely an opportunity for 'exotic' play. This will provide a more complete picture of belly dancers' experiences than simply looking at what belly dancers might represent.

In Chapter 5, I will look at issues of transculturation and some of the different ways that globalised belly dance becomes local in the hands of New Zealand belly dancers. This will include an analysis of the processes I used to create a dance that negotiated performance of cultural alterity and personal identity, along with examination of how local belly dancers engage with the discourses of globalised belly dance culture. I will pay particular attention to Christchurch tribal fusion belly dance troupe Kiwi Iwi's work in producing a style of belly dance that explicitly presents a Pacific identity.

Chapter 6 provides concluding comments, and draws on all the previous chapters to identify belly dancing in New Zealand as both a facet of globalised belly dancing and as a specifically local phenomenon informed by the challenges of biculturalism and the legacy of colonialism.

CHAPTER TWO

“When you first start it’s real hard work”:¹⁵ participants, rationales and strategies

This chapter provides an overview of the research strategies used in this project, and pays particular attention to the methods and rationale of participant recruitment and resource selection, along with the use of interviews, participant observation and a focus group with belly dancers. Drawing upon discourse analysis, post-structuralist and post-colonial theory, I examined New Zealand belly dance from an insider-outsider perspective. The focus was on how globalisation and hybridity may intersect with, and operate on, participants’ ideas about identity, both as New Zealanders and as women. My approach acknowledges feminist engagement with issues of intimacy and reciprocity in social research, while recognising that any research will ultimately reflect the social contexts in which it occurs, and that participants’ ideas and input, like the subject matter of this thesis, will sometimes be contradictory and complex. The project aimed to explore how belly dancing has become globalised, and challenge the narrow focus on the United States in literature surrounding ‘Western’ uses of the dance.

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, an analysis of belly dance in New Zealand requires exploration of multiple theoretical concerns. Existing literature on belly dance as practiced outside the Middle East focuses heavily on the significance of Orientalist discourse and the use of belly dance by non-Middle Eastern women as a means of exploring personal identity through performance of the Other. As a New Zealand woman and belly dancer myself, I began this project conscious of a circulating belief among my friends and associates that New Zealand women were not particularly ‘feminine,’ and that some belly dancers saw it as a pleasurable way to explore this neglected femininity. I was interested in using this knowledge as a starting point for a critical examination of New Zealand belly dancers’ perceptions about the dance, about femininity, and about doing belly dance in a New Zealand context.

A major focus for this research was analysis of how belly dance, as a form generally associated with the Middle East, intersects with New Zealand cultural conventions and

practices. My goal was to explore what belly dancers had to say about themselves as New Zealanders and what relationship, if any, they saw between being New Zealanders and being belly dancers. Because New Zealand's Middle Eastern diasporic population is small, there is comparatively little demand for professional belly dancers at restaurants, weddings and other celebrations (unlike parts of the United States and Australia).¹⁶ Thus, many New Zealand women who learn to belly dance often do so with minimal involvement with Middle Eastern communities, and study the dance primarily as a leisure activity. Some may even not have seen a live belly dancer before starting to learn.¹⁷ Yet there is enough interest in belly dancing to support classes throughout New Zealand.

The 2008 New Zealand Yellow Pages listed 13 belly dance schools,¹⁸ while in 2007, the Middle Eastern Dance Association of New Zealand (MEDANZ) listed 320 members living in places ranging from Keri Keri in the North to Stewart Island in the far South.¹⁹ These figures do not give an accurate picture of the numbers of belly dancers in New Zealand; there are known, established schools and/or teachers not listed in the Yellow Pages (such as those in Timaru and Dunedin), and both teachers and students of belly dance who have chosen not to be part of MEDANZ. While I was able to identify only one teacher who had no past or present involvement with MEDANZ at all during my initial research, which would seem to indicate that few are teaching formally, this does not preclude the existence of other teachers who do not advertise themselves nationally, or who offer informal or short-term classes.²⁰ It also obviously does not include Middle Eastern migrants who belly dance informally at home, or non-Middle Eastern New Zealanders who have tried and enjoyed belly dance classes for a few

¹⁵ GD, focus group discussion, 1st June 2008.

¹⁶ The 2006 New Zealand census reported a total of 17,514 people who claimed Middle Eastern ethnic identity. These people constituted the largest sub-group of the MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African) identity group which was included for the first time in the 2006 census, and which together totalled just 0.9 percent of people normally resident in New Zealand. See:

'New Zealand's 2006 Census of Population and Dwellings'2006. Statistics New Zealand.

¹⁷ I tried belly dance classes without ever having seen a performance, and several interview participants also indicated that they had only seen belly dancers on television or film before starting to learn; one admitted she had no idea what it was when persuaded to try classes for the first time.

¹⁸ There were five in Wellington, four in Auckland, three in Canterbury, two in the Bay of Plenty and one each in Nelson, Northland and the Wairarapa.

¹⁹ *MEDANZ membership list*, August 2007.

²⁰ For instance, when I began this research I saw an Asian-language advertisement for belly dancing posted in the University of Canterbury library building, which I was unable to follow up because I could not read the details.

years, but drifted away from formal study, who may also continue to practice at home for their own pleasure.

While belly dancing takes place in a variety of diverse countries, most popular and scholarly literature examines only Middle Eastern and North American belly dancing (Cooper 2004; Dox 2006; Rasmussen 2005; Sellers-Young 1992, 2005; Shay & Sellers-Young 2003). In the absence of any account of the development of belly dancing in New Zealand, I was interested in constructing a social history of how it developed in this context as background for understanding contemporary practices and beliefs about belly dance. This entailed talking to as many dancers as possible who had been involved in establishing belly dance classes, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, and examining the few magazine and newspaper articles available that reflected wider responses to belly dance in New Zealand. By gathering and collating this information, I could not only contextualise the research, but also provide a narrative for participating dancers. I consider that attention to the development of belly dance in a New Zealand context would lay ground for looking at belly dance as a contemporary transcultural and globalised activity, rather than perpetuating generalisations about ‘Western’ (ie North American) versus ‘Middle Eastern’ belly dance. After examining wider literature surrounding dance and the body, I also identified both a lack of attention to the physical experience of belly dancing and to how participants thought of it once it ceased to feel ‘exotic.’ I became increasingly interested in finding a suitable method of eliciting talk about these embodied experiences.

It was clear from the start that any adequate examination of the complexities and multiple factors involved in belly dance would need to draw on diverse sources of information and consider multiple ways of researching. Douglas Kellner (2003: 45), responding to George Ritzer’s model of ‘McDonaldisation’, has argued that a “multiperspectivist social theory” is necessary to best analyse “the multiplicity of economic, sociopolitical, and cultural aspects of McDonaldisation” in a contextual and multidimensional way. As I have outlined in the introduction to this thesis, globalised belly dance has features of ‘McDonaldisation’, most particularly in the way it operates as a kind of portable package of “myths, semiotic codes, discourses and ...transformative practices” with which people may engage at a local level to produce their own distinct “meaningful experiences” (Kellner 2003: 38-39). While the belly dance package - comprising models for classes and events and ideas about professionalism and uses of the dance - comes largely from the United States, participants infuse and adapt it to suit their own ends in multiple ways, determined by idiosyncratic socio-historical contexts and

personal positions. This examination of the ways belly dance manifests in New Zealand thus follows Kellner's lead in drawing on a number of theoretical approaches and strategies for collecting material for analysis.

Overview

To gather data for this project, I combined one-on-one interviews with belly dance teachers with more focused examination of two case studies of hybridity and transculturation in a uniquely New Zealand context – participant observation at the Oasis Dance Camp 2007, and analysis of the 'Oceanic tribal belly dance' performance troupe Kiwi Iwi. The accumulation of information involved a combination of group and individual interviews, and analysis of available video material. As research progressed, I decided to conduct a small focus group of Christchurch dancers for more in-depth discussion of new issues that had arisen, specifically a need for attention to embodied aspects of people's engagement with belly dancing. I also engaged in an analysis of the processes, ideas and conventions I drew upon to create a belly dance performance in a particular style that required me to adopt a less familiar choice of movements and negotiate representation of a specific Egyptian cultural stereotype.

I interviewed, spoke to and conducted email discussions with 34 people. They were 24 past and present New Zealand teachers of belly dance (including one who was not formally interviewed but who contributed via informal email discussion), eight non-teaching participants, and two non-dancers who had worked with belly dancers on creative projects which came to my attention during the course of the study. All but two of the teachers and focus group participants that I spoke to were past or present members of MEDANZ, of which I am a current member and former president and national committee member.

I did not explicitly request demographic data from these participants. However, many divulged some demographic information during our interviews and focus group interactions, which I was able to add to knowledge gleaned from past personal encounters, other dancers' reports, and/or website information. Almost all the participants were aged over 40, with a small number in their early to mid-30s and two in their 20s. The oldest was 68. This weighting towards an older age group was to be expected, given my choice to interview mainly long-term participant teachers, as outlined below. All of the teachers interviewed were in their mid-30s or older. Of the two participants in their 20s, one had briefly taught belly dance in the past but was

not questioned about her teaching experiences, as she was a participant in the group interview, and the other, who had never taught, was part of the focus group. The rest of the dancers interviewed, who had never taught belly dance, ranged in age from early 30s to late 40s. Five of the 34 people who participated in this study identified themselves as having Maori ancestry. Ten indicated they were born outside New Zealand, and three said they were children of migrants from non-English speaking countries. One was born and grew up in the Middle East. Three participants were male. Two were located in countries outside New Zealand at the time of the research.²¹

A small number of participants mentioned connections between their interest in belly dance and a prior interest in Middle Eastern culture and people. For example, several women were or had been in relationships with Middle Eastern men; in some cases these men were the fathers of their children. One such participant said belly dance created an ongoing cultural connection with her former husband's homeland for her and their child. Others worked with new migrants (a few as English language teachers) and had seen social belly dance in domestic settings in New Zealand - for example, when attending weddings. Several had visited Egypt or Turkey and watched belly dancers there, either before or after beginning to learn the dance themselves.

All participants were advised that material raised in interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations would be confidential. They were also guaranteed anonymity wherever possible, although as I outline below, the unique circumstances of this research meant this was not possible for every participant. All participants have been identified via pseudonymous initials, selected because they tell the reader little about the participants. I could have chosen pseudonyms for participants, or asked them to choose their own, but felt that names have too much potential to colour readers' responses. The use of performance-style Arabic or fantasy names (as employed by Wright and Dreyfus (1998), for example) could over-emphasise the performance of otherness which, as the research revealed, was only one facet of belly dancing. There was also a risk that any name selected could be the performance name or

²¹ Both of these dancers were contacted by email. I expressly sought the contact details for one, an influential teacher in the past who had moved to another country, by emailing another dancer I knew of who seemed likely to have kept up communication with her. The other was the dancer-scholar Andrea Deagon, whose New Zealand connection I discovered early in the research process, when looking for articles about belly dance online. Our correspondence was brief and informal but helpful, as she shared some memories and supplied the names of some belly dance teachers she remembered from when she lived in New Zealand.

real name of another belly dancer in New Zealand. I used two sets of initials in one case to allow a participant the opportunity to speak freely about belly dance generally, as well as about her project, without those comments being linked back to her more identifiable role. Similarly, I have not differentiated between individual interviews carried out face to face, over the phone or via email, to avoid revealing which participants were in Christchurch and which lived elsewhere in New Zealand or overseas.

Insider-outsider status and issues of anonymity

The small size of New Zealand's belly dance community, and my pre-existing role in it, created both problems and possibilities for this research project. Despite my efforts to interview dancers I did not know, there were only seven interviewees in total who I had never met, and only one dancer of whom I had never heard before, who seemed to operate in a different network. Thus, I could never be perceived as entirely disinterested by the other participants. Because I hold a teaching position at a belly dance school, there was a risk of a perceived commercial conflict of interest if I collected information about or canvassed students from other schools. The close-knit nature of New Zealand belly dance also made providing participants with complete anonymity very difficult. It was not possible, for instance, to offer true anonymity to the members of Kiwi Iwi because the characteristics that made the troupe particularly worthy of study for this project – the deliberate hybridisation of American Tribal Style belly dance with *kapa haka* and other 'Kiwi' and 'Pacific' elements – are unique to them, and their identities can be readily determined. Similarly, the identity of the dancer who both founded Kiwi Iwi and sponsored the Oasis Dance Camp is well-known to New Zealand belly dancers, and will be recognisable to them despite my use of initials to refer to her in this thesis.

These issues which arose out of my embeddedness in the small world of New Zealand belly dancing, however, also improved the chances that people I approached would agree to participate, and enhanced the quality of our interactions. My insider-outsider status meant that participants and I already shared some knowledge and perceptions about belly dance - the concept of a *hafla* or a drum solo, for instance, was mutually understood – and we were often able to talk easily together about other New Zealand and international dancers that we knew (either personally or by reputation). We were also easily able to share our ideas about books, videos and music we had used and, in some cases, events we had attended. My membership of MEDANZ gave me access to its membership list, which made finding the names and contact

details of belly dancers outside my immediate circle easier than it would otherwise have been. My previous roles in MEDANZ as a former president and national committee member, and ongoing involvement with belly dance, may also have helped in some cases. Belly dancers are often wary of being misrepresented by people outside the wider belly dance community. Since most participants did not know me other than by name or beyond brief interaction at past dance festivals, it may have been necessary for them to know that they would be talking to a researcher with an informed understanding of the internal dynamics of non-indigenous belly dance in order for them to take part.

Preliminary data, formulation of questions and participant selection

Prior to beginning the process of selecting potential participants, I undertook an intensive examination of a variety of popular texts available to New Zealand belly dancers, and of articles about belly dancing that had appeared in New Zealand newspapers and magazines. This reading allowed me to broaden my understanding of what ideas, fantasies and narratives other New Zealand belly dancers might draw on, in addition to those already familiar to me because of my long-term engagement with belly dance.

I examined several popular books about belly dancing, published between 1974 and 2005, which are available in New Zealand public libraries, along with numerous newspaper articles printed in New Zealand between 1997 and 2007 that referred to local belly dancers or interviewed them about their dancing. The books included those aimed at teaching readers how to belly dance - such as Tina Hobin's *Belly Dancing for Health and Relaxation* (1982) – as well as books providing a historical/cultural overview of belly dancing. I paid particular attention to Wendy Buonaventura's *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World* (1989), its precursor *Belly Dance: The Serpent and the Sphinx* (1983), and the widely-circulated *Grandmother's Secrets: the ancient rituals and healing power of belly dancing* (Al-Rawi 1999), all of which were held in several public libraries around New Zealand.²² Buonaventura's books, both initially published in England, are often cited in both scholarly and non-scholarly writing about belly dance. Numerous participants said they owned or had read *Serpent of the Nile* or *Grandmother's Secrets*. I also examined some well-known websites that dancers with web access might also use today, particularly www.shira.net (an informational site), www.bhuz.com (a discussion site),

²² In 2008 six New Zealand public libraries, plus the Middle Eastern Dance Association of New Zealand's member-only library, held copies of *Serpent of the Nile*, and ten had *Serpent and the Sphinx*. An impressive 27 libraries held *Grandmother's Secrets*.

www.gildedserpent.com (a ‘webzine’ with a slant towards United States belly dance history) – all located in the United States - and the Middle Eastern Dance Association of New Zealand website www.medanz.org.nz. These articles, books and websites allowed me to construct a background picture of how belly dance ‘talk’ in New Zealand reflected many of the same features of belly dance ‘talk’ that could be seen on North American websites and in books produced and circulated in North America and the United Kingdom. The New Zealand articles, along with Google searches on New Zealand belly dance, which provided the urls of some dancers’ websites, introduced me to the names of belly dancers I had previously not encountered, whose names and contact details could be added to a list of potential interviewees.

This review informed a list of questions I developed, which would be used to guide a series of interviews with New Zealand belly dancers. (Appendix VII) The questions were designed both to draw out the ‘talk’ identified above and to help construct a picture of how belly dance began and developed in a New Zealand context, and the ways belly dance in New Zealand might be different to belly dance in other places. I also wanted to pay some attention to participants’ ideas about belly dance styles and different kinds of enjoyment generated by, for example, the practice of tribal belly dance compared to oriental belly dance. The articles I had read mostly presented belly dance as homogenous. This did not reflect my experiences in a dance culture where participants talked about belly dance as made up of many styles. While I had determined that most of the interviewees would be belly dance teachers, some would not – the Kiwi Iwi members were solely performers – and I wanted to leave space for other participants to talk about their own performance experiences, including performance projects unknown to me at the start of the research.

Thus, four sets of questions were formulated, submitted and approved by the University of Canterbury School of Sociology and Anthropology Ethics Committee. The first set was for all interviewees and comprised broad, open-ended questions that centred on their early involvement with belly dance, the ideas they had about it, and the relationship they perceived between belly dancing and themselves, with particular focus on ideas about gender and about being New Zealanders. The second set of questions, specifically for teachers, aimed to identify what information about belly dancing they were circulating among students, who those students were, and any changes in the ways they sourced this information. The third set of questions (designed primarily with Kiwi Iwi in mind) aimed to elicit talk about the dynamics of group performance and audience responses to the dancers’ work. Two additional questions,

formulated for overseas visitors to Oasis Dance Camp, were not used, due to the lack of responses to invitations to be interviewed from these visitors.

I then developed a list of 43 potential interviewees using the sources indicated above, as well as the August 2007 MEDANZ teacher contact list of 33 teachers (located on the MEDANZ website)²³ and the August 2007 MEDANZ membership list of 320 people (which included those on the teacher list and was available to me as a member). This initial list comprised 38 dancers either self-identified as teachers on their personal websites, in newspaper articles or on the MEDANZ list, or whose names had been suggested to me by other belly dancers. The remaining five were dancers not identified as teachers, who were interesting in other ways (for instance, as performers of an unusual style), and included three members of Kiwi Iwi. I was interested in hearing belly dance teachers' stories about the development of belly dance in New Zealand, and their observations of how people they had taught had responded to it, as well as their own personal responses.

Since I had been involved in the dance myself for ten years, I was particularly interested in identifying those who had begun teaching before 1998, when I started learning, and especially before 1991, when my primary teacher started learning. Such participants would be able to provide invaluable information about periods in New Zealand belly dance of which I had neither personal nor anecdotal knowledge. The MEDANZ teacher list was particularly useful here because it listed the year these women began studying belly dance and the year they began teaching it. I also considered it important to interview dancers from all the regions of New Zealand where my research had indicated belly dance classes were available, wherever possible, along with teachers who might be representative of new developments, such as tribal style. I tried especially to include dancers in rural areas or those who might operate outside a large local belly dance community. I wanted to include teachers or performers who were of Maori or Polynesian descent, because I was conscious of a belief circulating among my own dance friends that Maori seemed underrepresented in New Zealand belly dance classes and wanted to explore why this might be the case. Thus, in these cases I readily included those who met such criteria even if they had begun dancing or teaching after 1998. Finally, I wanted to ensure that I interviewed as many dancers as I could who were outside of my personal dance networks.

²³ Numbers of teachers publically listed on the website reduced significantly during the period I was researching this thesis, after MEDANZ joined the Australasian Performing Rights Association (APRA), which required the organisation to pay fees for playing music during its festival and show.

I then refined the list to a more manageable 33 potential participants, given the time frame and length limitations of an MA thesis, with the intention of returning to the larger list if responses were poor. The initial list seemed overly weighted towards Auckland and Christchurch, with 11 Auckland teachers and 10 Christchurch individuals (including three dancers from Kiwi Iwi) listed. I pursued interviews with nine Auckland teachers, five of whom indicated, either via their personal websites or their MEDANZ teacher listing, that they had been teaching since before 1998. In Christchurch I interviewed five past and present teachers (three of whom also started teaching well before 1998), plus the three Kiwi Iwi members.²⁴ I also interviewed two dancers based in Dunedin, three in the Wellington area and one in the rural South Island. The remainder were in Northland and the central North Island. The dancers who I decided not to pursue for interview had named their teachers on their websites, and these were dancers already on the list. At the time the list was compiled (August 2007), 34 teachers gave their names and contact details on the MEDANZ website teacher list. I approached a total of 22 of these teachers and subsequently interviewed 14 of them. This reflects the fact that while most of the participants did have some past MEDANZ involvement, not all were current members or promoting themselves as teachers via the organisation at the time.

One-on-one interviews with other teachers of dance seemed to be the most practicable and egalitarian method of eliciting much of the complex kind of data that would best serve this project, within a necessarily limited time frame. While I was most interested in what participants had to say about belly dancing, rather than how they talked about it, I wanted to remain open to observations and insights that participants might share during the interviewing process. It was important to me that participants were able to have as much control over what they talked about during interviews as possible, while also gathering workable data for analysis. Some feminist researchers, most notably Ann Oakley (1981), have expressed concerns about the unbalanced power dynamics inherent in a researcher-interviewee model. Oakley's non-hierarchical, intimate and collaborative model for feminist interviewers of women proposed a shift from treating the interviewee as a data-providing object towards researchers collecting data for those being researched (Oakley 1981: 49). As Jane Ribbens (1989: 590) observes, however, "there are limits to the extent to which our research can be regarded as being on behalf of the people we are researching."

²⁴ There were some dancers in both cities who had begun teaching well before 1991, who were all included as potential interviewees because of this, but I have not given specific numbers or dates here as to do so would undermine their anonymity.

The research relationship is not solely private and personal, but has a public aspect (ibid: 586). The power dynamics in an interview are also fluid, meaning “no two interviews are the same” (Cotterill 1992: 599). Ning Tang (2002: 719) notes that shifting power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee occur even when interviewing peers (as I was when interviewing these dancers), due to “the interviewee as well as the interviewer’s perceptions of social, cultural and personal differences.” Confidence in their own knowledge and experience as belly dancers was particularly noticeable among those who started studying prior to 1991, many of whom were also significantly older than me. During one such interview the interviewee began to ask me some challenging questions about what I liked and my own belly dance practice. Thus our differing levels of experience in the belly dance scene, along with other variables like age, education and geographic location, complicated the idea of myself and most of these interviewees being able to connect purely, as Oakley posits, on the grounds that we were all women, or that we were all belly dancers. As I relate below, our common experiences as belly dancers did help facilitate easier exchange of information, however, particularly with the two dancers who were not involved with MEDANZ and who did not know me at all. In line with Oakley’s (1981: 49) call for “no intimacy without reciprocity,” I shared some stories about my experiences of belly dancing during these interviews, which seemed to help foster a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

In several cases I reassured participants that their comments would be confidential, and that they could retract anything they said, when they indicated they believed they had said or were about to make a risky statement in order to fully answer a question. I was nonetheless surprised at the apparent ease and confidence with which a few participants seemingly unconcernedly disclosed issues of a personal nature, and the vehemence with which some criticised aspects of belly dance in New Zealand which they did not like, in one case even saying they did not care who knew what they had said. These factors indicated to me both that participants trusted me with sensitive information, which reinforced my awareness of my own power as the interviewer and compiler of data, and that they felt confident enough in their opinions and experiences to direct the interview at times, which reinforced my awareness of their reciprocal power as the providers of data that I needed.

Some interviewees also chose to request questions ahead of time so they could plan their responses, to amend the transcripts of their interviews (BL, IR), to provide their own summary of what was discussed during the interview (IB), and to email their follow-up thoughts

(CK). These aspects of the interview process reflected James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's (2004: 45) observation that interviewees are never passive but "always already" actively involved in making meaning. Interviews are dynamic, with both interviewer and interviewee contributing to the meaning that is made, and the "activated subjects" piecing experiences together before, during and after the interview takes place (ibid.). While the content of the answers remains important, the emphasis of an active interview shifts to the research participant's "ability to convey situated experiential realities in terms that are locally comprehensible (ibid)." An interview on another day might have yielded slightly different responses. Thus, it is important to recognise that while I am the ultimate interpreter of the data I collected, and that these interpretations reflect my idiosyncratic social, historical, geographic and educational positions, the participants' responses similarly reflect their positioning, and are the outcome of what they considered worth saying (and not saying) at the time of the interviews. They too have actively contributed; they are not passive providers of unfiltered information.

Talking belly dance: the interviews

I approached the 33 listed dancers either by email, letter or directly at Oasis Dance Camp, expressing my interest in interviewing them. These approaches comprised an introductory letter, individually addressed (see Appendix I) and a hard or electronic copy of an information sheet (see Appendix III, Appendix IV). Twenty-eight of these women agreed either to a recorded face to face or telephone interview, or to be interviewed via email; the effects of illness and time constraints for some meant twenty-six were eventually interviewed. Only one participant actively declined to take part, saying she was too busy to be involved. The other four did not respond to my initial approach (one, I later learned, had left the country). This high degree of positive response indicated that the project appealed to the dancers contacted, and was the chief reason I did not intensively pursue the non-respondent dancers.²⁵ Many expressed eagerness to read the thesis when it was complete. Being able to take part in academic research, particularly research that contributed to the construction of a history of belly dancing in New Zealand, may have been attraction enough for some participants, since this suggested the dance

²⁵ There were two exceptions: one rural dancer, part of a fairly isolated group, who I knew had started using videos and whose style had changed significantly over the years, and an Auckland dancer who was repeatedly cited as highly influential by participants in this study. Despite several approaches via email and letter, neither responded. I was told that the first dancer was in the process of moving at the time of my approaches and had communications problems due to storm damage to her telephone lines. The second dancer did not know me personally and, as other participants informed me, was reputed to be difficult to contact even by those who knew her.

and dancers would be taken seriously. The popular books and websites about belly dancing mentioned above frequently use ideas about history to position belly dance as an ancient art, not titillation, and it is common for belly dancers to draw on these ideas to validate their involvement in the dance.

1) Individual interviews

I carried out five individual face-to-face interviews in Christchurch. Two took place in the homes of the interviewees, at their request, one at the home of a mutual friend, one at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance studio (where the interviewee worked), and one, with an interviewee who knew me well, in my home. Another took place at Oasis Dance Camp. The remaining 16 individual interviews were via telephone; I did these interviews from my home, recording the calls using an adapter. On each occasion the interview began with brief small-talk and a short recap of the details already supplied on the information sheet, before the recorder was switched on. When carrying out the face to face interviews, I generally supplied a new copy of the information sheet, along with a consent form to be signed and handed back. (The other participants emailed or posted back their consent forms.)

During these interviews I used my question list (see Appendix VI) as a check to ensure that topics were covered, but did not always discuss them in the same order. In line with my training as a journalist, I would often pick up on an interesting comment and ask about it to draw out the interviewee's ideas in more depth. I was thus open to any observations, emotional responses or anecdotes that the dancers chose to share during these interviews and frequently followed them through even if they did not relate directly to the question line. This intention - along with the informal aspects of the interviews - meant that interviews often took the form of conversations or dialogues. In the case of one interview at Oasis Dance Camp, which was interrupted by the need to return to class, the first part of the interview closely followed the question sheet, but when it continued we instead discussed some ideas the participant had raised that connected her ideas about belly dance and Maori identity.

Interviews generally lasted around one hour each, though some were considerably longer. This was particularly true of the interviews with dancers who started belly dancing during the 1970s, who had a wealth of stories to share, and who seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk about their past experiences. In these cases it was easy for me, as a

researcher who was also a belly dancer, to encourage tales of encounters with legendary performers and teachers. One dancer, OY, who I interviewed in person, produced a collection of famous classic belly dance LPs which I knew about but never actually seen or heard. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and a copy of the original audio recording stored on computer. Participants were then sent the transcripts of their own interviews (all but two via email) and invited to make amendments where they felt necessary. In most cases the interviews were approved as written; where changes were made, they were usually for clarity or to remove statements where the participant felt they had talked too freely about other individuals.

The four dancers who indicated they preferred the option of an email interview were sent the list of questions used in the interviews, in two cases modified to relate more specifically to them individually - for example, to centre on their specialist style, an event they were involved in, or their experiences dancing in different countries. Their responses were necessarily simpler and more concise, but obviously well-considered, and easily compiled.²⁶

2) *Kiwi Iwi*

Kiwi Iwi's founder and the troupe's current members were known to me before I began this research, the troupe having been created at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance while I was a student and junior teacher there. I conducted an individual face-to-face interview with Kiwi Iwi's (now retired) founder, in which we discussed the troupe's creation. Three of the six current members – one founding member, one very long-term member and the newest member – agreed to be interviewed as a group, at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance studio, a space we all used regularly. This group interview was quite informal and lively, with the interaction between the participants and myself producing some unexpected insights and observations. In particular, the interaction between the women when talking about their responses to their *moko*-inspired chin adornments and their performances of *haka* indicated the simultaneous ambivalence about and emotional attachment to these symbols of Maori culture within the troupe more effectively than individual interviews would have done. It was also possible for the dancers to jog each others' memories about events, and even about the ways they had adapted movements, which they were also able to demonstrate for me.

²⁶ In one case, I emailed the participant a second time to ask for clarifying detail, but otherwise accepted the responses as given. One participant added her own observations about New Zealand belly dance in addition to her responses to the questions asked.

Globalised belly dance: Oasis Dance Camp

Oasis Dance Camp is a three-day residential event specialising in “dances of the Middle East and the Arab world,” the longest-running camp of its kind in the United States (“Oasis Dance Camp” 2007). Oasis offers intensive classes by North American master belly dance teacher Cassandra Shore, along with a percussionist and a second guest teacher each year. It has been held in a variety of locations in the United States since 1985 and in New Zealand twice –in Canterbury in 2004 and in Tongariro in 2007. A total of 34 women participated in the Tongariro camp in 2007, 11 of whom travelled from the United States (including four camp staff) and one from Australia. Of the New Zealanders, nine came from Christchurch, eight from various towns in the central North Island, five from Wellington and one from Nelson; two were United States expatriates and three were migrants from non-English-speaking cultures. All participants were advised of my intent to observe via a note in the pre-camp newsletter (Appendix II). I also introduced myself in person on the first evening of camp, restating my research focus and inviting participants to talk with me about the project if they wished. I carried out one interview during camp and arranged two more with North Island participants, to be carried out via telephone on our return home. I also tape recorded (with permission) and transcribed two lectures which included question and answer sessions.

Despite my willingness to carry out more interviews if the opportunity arose, my research at Oasis was mostly limited to observation. While some participants were curious about the project, in general they seemed less interested in being directly involved in interviews and discussions during camp, probably because they preferred using their limited free time for rest after demanding classes. None of the international visitors responded directly to my invitation to be interviewed about the event, though many spoke to me informally about their impressions of New Zealand and New Zealanders generally. I took particular note of how the New Zealand camp participants interacted with those from North America, and of ways that food, decor and language were used to establish New Zealandness within and around the North American-led, Middle Eastern-flavoured conventions of Oasis Dance Camp. My simultaneous involvement in Oasis Dance Camp as another participant there to study dance blurred some of the boundaries between me as researcher and the participants in this project.

Embodied responses: focus group/personal dance analysis

When the initial interviewing process was nearing completion, I realised that the interview questions I had chosen did not explicitly address the embodied experiences of belly dancers. Contemporary theoretical approaches to dance, such as those employed by Pirkko Markula (2006) and Helen Thomas (2003), draw on approaches to the body and identity which take into consideration dancers' sensory experiences. Because belly dance is so often positioned as representative variously of the Middle East, of an imagined, geographically non-specific Orient, or of exotic, sexualised womanhood, writing about the dance has looked primarily at representation, particularly issues around Western women self-representing as 'exotic Others'. Ethnographic research into dance in the Middle East has also focused mainly on describing what dancers do and their movements' meaning within specific cultural contexts, rather than paying attention to how the dance feels. (One notable exception is Laurel Victoria Gray's (2000) article on studying the Sufi whirling ritual, in which she writes in detail of the physical and emotional sensations she experienced while learning to whirl.)²⁷

I used two strategies to explore the embodied aspects of belly dancing at this point in the research. Firstly, I conducted a focus group of six dancers with several years' experience, all of whom were long-term students of the School of Contemporary Belly Dance. The focus group explored their ideas about how belly dance became more 'ordinary' or habitual, and the sensory experiences they had while belly dancing. Secondly, I analysed a dance performance of my own, paying attention to the processes involved in developing the piece as I worked through the music, the intended performance space, and the style of dance I was performing. The focus for this analysis was exploring the emotional and physical sensations I experienced and the issues of appropriation and representation I considered as I negotiated a performance of cultural alterity. The outcome of this analysis is discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

The focus group participants were of varied cultural backgrounds, and knew me, and each other, well through dancing and other social contexts. Unlike the dancers I interviewed initially, none were teachers of belly dance. The focus group session was held in the familiar environment of the school dance studio, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Food and non-

²⁷ "My leg muscles were burning. This was repetitive movement; there was no relief since the weight could not be shifted to the other side. I tried to remember to breathe, thinking that, of all the dance classes I had experienced in my life, this must surely be the toughest. I teetered."

alcoholic drink were available. To help initiate talk about the dance that was centred around bodily sensations rather than performing, I read aloud some quotations from earlier interviews in which participants had talked about their belly dance practice in more embodied or habitual terms, and invited responses from the focus group members to these comments. (See Appendix VII.) I also asked some more general questions about the sensations and emotional responses belly dance generated, and how the dancers experienced learning to do a movement.

Like the Kiwi Iwi group interview, this session was lively and produced detailed discussion that explored the physical sensations of dancing and included reflections on how doing belly dancing for a long time had shaped the ways they experienced their bodies in a variety of contexts. The comparative informality of the focus group engendered an easy flow of conversation that meant participants readily brought their own ideas to the discussion. Most notably, despite my structuring of the discussion points to focus on the sensations of dancing rather than performing, they frequently spoke about performing on stage as well. This indicated that they still considered it a very important part of the dance, challenging some of my nascent ideas about pleasurable bodily sensation becoming most important. They also independently brought up their own ideas about gender, ethnic and cultural differences between New Zealand and the Middle East, and how they believed social dancing and music worked in a New Zealand setting.

Analytic process

I first aimed to analyse dancers' talk about belly dancing, and began by searching newspaper articles for words or phrases that I already thought of as common tropes about belly dancing – for example, 'by women, for women,' 'sensual, not sexual,' 'a fertility dance' – as well as any descriptions the dancers gave of the pleasures or benefits of belly dancing. I marked these with highlighter pen on printed copies of the articles. This allowed me to identify some common ideas which I then sought to draw out in the interview process, by formulating questions based on this information. I applied the same technique to the interview transcripts, this time looking for participants' talk around some key issues. These included transculturation, hybridity and globalisation; ideas about the local and how, if at all, belly dancing fitted into their concept of themselves as New Zealanders; ideas about femininity and the performance of feminine selves; and examples of how belly dancing had changed during the time period in which they had been involved. I noticed that asking participants questions about how belly

dance and New Zealand intersected for them produced a lot of talk about New Zealand culture and identity, including their ideas about the responsibilities and tensions they felt as New Zealanders representing other cultures, and issues of cultural appropriation. I then cut and pasted quotations from the transcripts into two separate documents, one centering on ideas about embodiment and femininity, and one relating to transculturation and local identity, for ongoing reference. Several quotations seemed to belong in either category and were included in both documents.

My exploration of dance literature during this time made me realise that writing about non-indigenous belly dance, with its focus on representation, lacked attention to the dance as a normative bodily practice for some dancers. I returned to the interview transcripts and found sections where participants had begun talking about belly dancing in terms of movement. I then compiled these quotes in a separate document, selecting several to use as talking points for a focus group that would pay attention to the feelings belly dancing engendered in participants' bodies. This produced more, valuable talk about participants' perceptions of New Zealand culture, as well as useful information about the different ways they experienced and used belly dance.

Conclusions

Overall, this multifaceted approach produced a 'slice' of data about the New Zealand belly dance scene which cut across a variety of geographic contexts, levels of experience, styles and uses of belly dance, and participants. It produced a great deal more information than could realistically be incorporated in a master's thesis, particularly in terms of anecdotes and observations about the dance's history in New Zealand. However, it also provided material that was often very complex and thoughtful. The combination of email and one-on-one interviews produced a rich field of data that invited deep and rewarding analysis.

The high proportion of MEDANZ members masks anecdotal reports that there are significant numbers of belly dance teachers and practitioners outside the organisation. Input from some of these participants could have been valuable, and might have demonstrated to what extent formal organisations like MEDANZ structure members' attitudes and activities. There were also mentions of completely unfamiliar dancers from the earlier days of belly dance during the interviews, which would be interesting to follow up for a longer research project.

The age group into which most participants fell, while wide, was largely skewed to the over-40s and will have coloured the overall tone of the data, especially with reference to expressing femininity and sexuality and attitudes towards music and dance. Belly dancers in their 20s might feel differently; as women born to second wave feminist gains, some may identify with Danzy Senna's (1995: 7) hoped-for space where they could "wear lipstick and still be free" and have less interest in the 'dressing up' aspects of belly dance. It would be valuable to pursue comparative research into this group. Generally, however, the approach used has successfully provided enough information to address the key research questions that structured this inquiry.

Part of my initial focus was to find out how New Zealand participants made their experiences of belly dance local, but I found that with the exception of Kiwi Iwi, the dancers interviewed were able to identify very few deliberate choices to do this. This inability, along with the critical distance required during the research process, helped me look anew at what initially seemed unremarkable to me as a belly dancer – the fact that most participants talked about teaching, learning and performing belly dancing in very similar ways to the ways that dancers in other countries talked about it on websites that I regularly visited – and rethink some of my assumptions about hybridity and transculturation in relation to belly dance.²⁸ During this research project I engaged with critical writing about hybridity, transculturation and globalisation, continued to practice and talk about belly dance (with friends, other dance teachers and online) and interviewed other New Zealand belly dancers. These three factors together allowed me to critically explore and rework the model of 'Western' belly dance, and New Zealand participation in it, into one of a globalised activity.

One of the most rewarding aspects of conducting this research was collecting dancers' stories about how they began learning and teaching belly dance, the things that made it interesting to them and the ways they felt the dance had changed over the years. In the next chapter, I will use some of the material gathered to contextualise New Zealand belly dance within a wider history of belly dance as it has developed in Western countries and in Egypt²⁹ during the 20th and 21st centuries.

²⁸ When I first began thinking about this topic, I visualised New Zealand belly dancing as an activity occurring at one end of a trail, starting in the Middle East, shifting to the USA and thence to New Zealand, possibly via Australia. I knew that being in a New Zealand context would localise it to some degree, and that transculturation and hybridity could be ongoing processes. However, I did not yet grasp the idea that belly dancing itself could be the 'culture' wherein the flow of ideas and practices was taking place, and that this would allow me to consider Middle Eastern, North American and local influences at one time. This was a small but significant shift.

²⁹ The reasons I focus on Egyptian belly dance in this project will be outlined in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER THREE

“What lies under what is, is what was once:”³⁰ the development of a New Zealand belly dance culture.

When Australian researchers Jan Wright and Shoshana Dreyfus (1998: 6-7) visited a belly dance class in the late 1990s, they described women “laughing and whispering” amid a “glorious jangling and shimmering array of beaded and tasselled garments interspaced with pale flesh.” Their account reflected both what they saw and what they expected to see, as non-belly dancers looking in on an activity already constructed in ‘Western’ minds as sensual and exotic. Almost a decade later, I participated in a residential belly dance camp in New Zealand. There, I also found what I expected, as an experienced belly dancer – women in sweatpants and light, noiseless hip scarves, sipping on water bottles as they analysed and drilled new movements, and carefully stretched their bodies to avoid stiffness later.

These two very different observations, though close together on a world scale in historical and geographic location, demonstrate both some of the varied ways in which students may enjoy and participate in belly dance today – costumes and socialising, fitness and technical achievement. They also show ways that belly dance outside its cultures of origin has changed, while still occurring at an intersection of diverse fantasies and discourses about representation, the body and identity. I begin this chapter with a brief account of the belly dance camp, outlining how it demonstrated many features of globalised belly dance. From there, I will contextualise the event by analysing some of the ways in which New Zealand belly dancers have engaged with Western fantasies of the Orient, along with learning formats and approaches mostly created in North America, during the period that belly dance has developed into a globalised, commodified activity. This will include an examination of some key popular texts used by New Zealand belly dancers prior to wide uptake of the internet. This chapter will also examine some socio-historical factors that led to the uptake of belly dance outside its

³⁰ NW, personal interview, 9th November 2007

indigenous contexts, with particular attention to how New Zealand women became involved in belly dance, according to the dancers involved in this project.

Oasis Dance Camp: globalised belly dance in action

Oasis Dance Camp, held in Tongariro, New Zealand, in November 2007, demonstrated first of all the development of belly dancing into an institutionalised activity centred not just around dancing but the circulation of commodities. The Oasis format, developed in the United States, was transplanted largely unchanged, complete with staff, including the camp director and the master teachers, and was structured around formal dance and drum lessons and lectures (Fig. 2). The participants – from New Zealand, the United States and Australia - received certificates as proof of attendance, as well as CDs and booklets containing choreography notes, lyric translations and educational articles. They paid to attend, and could buy and sell costumes, CDs and DVDs, accessories, and specialist classwear during the camp. The dancers could also purchase DVDs with footage of the camp, including the choreographies they learned, to study from later. Oasis thus allowed them to combine a traditional dance study approach, engaging directly with the three-dimensional “lived body” of a teacher, and the increasingly common method of learning by studying a media representation of that body (Sellers-Young 2005: 299 - 300). They were supplied with bottled water to drink in class and wore workout gear and t-shirts proclaiming attendance at similar events in the past.

The Arabic term *hafla* (a party), which in globalised belly dance has been adapted to describe a social event centred on belly dancing, was here applied to a fairly formal ‘Gala Hafla’, at which the teachers and participants performed in costumes. An MC introduced each performance, and the audience, made up of participants and a few guests, sat and watched attentively. On a different night, participants had another *hafla* based on a traditional henna party, a relaxed event where they danced wearing Gulf-style *thobes*³¹ over their ordinary clothes, and had both Berber-inspired henna patterns and airbrushed temporary tattoos in Celtic and fashion designs applied to their bodies.

The language spoken by most participants (New Zealand English), the physical space – a school gymnasium and ski lodge in Tongariro National Park, in New Zealand’s central North

³¹ The Gulf region *thobe nashal* is a very large loose gown and the women’s social dance done while wearing it (also over regular party clothes) involves manipulating its sleeves and embroidered panel. Many of the thobes at Oasis were homemade.

Island – and some deliberate representation of ‘New Zealandness’³² in recognition of the presence of tourists, helped to locate the event in New Zealand. But Oasis Dance Camp could easily have taken place anywhere in the world where belly dancing is not culturally normative, but is enjoyed as a hobby. It seemed to exemplify the kind of deterritorialised, hybridising global culture that, as Anthony Smith (1994: 177) observes, is “tied to no place or period... a true melange of disparate components brought from everywhere and nowhere.” It is not, however, completely “without context” (ibid). Many elements were included precisely because they evoked ideas about the Middle East and belly dancing. To understand some of the practices and conventions of globalised belly dance, it is necessary to unpack some underlying beliefs and fantasies, and examine how they have been used to encourage non-Middle Eastern women, including New Zealand women, to belly dance.

Priestesses, gypsies and mothers: belly dance as women’s culture

Wendy Buonaventura’s *Belly dancing: the serpent and the sphinx* (1983) and *Serpent of the Nile: women and dance in the Arab World* (1989), along with Iranian Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi’s *Grandmother’s Secrets: the ancient rituals and healing power of belly dancing* (1999), help circulate some of the most pervasive ideas among non-indigenous belly dancers.³³ These books are widely available to and read by New Zealand belly dancers. *Serpent of the Nile*, in particular, is often cited in both scholarly and popular books about belly dancing (see, for example Helland 1989/2001), and several participants in this study said they owned it. These writers say belly dancing originates as an ancient, matriarchal women’s fertility rite, which was suppressed with the rise of Semitic, patriarchal religions (Buonaventura 1989: 32-33). Both writers present belly dance as a way to affirm femininity without male involvement, which can transcend cultural difference and offer modern Western women a healthy way to reconnect with their womanly bodies. For Buonaventura (1989: 123) in particular, belly dancing in cabarets and the “hootchy koochy” dance of vaudeville represent a degraded version of something originally sacred and best enjoyed in private, a position reflected in assertions among non-indigenous belly dancers that the dance must be sensual, not sexual (Cooper 2004: 136). Al-Rawi (1999: 63), who also links

³² This was achieved via references to Maori language and culture – the event was named both ‘Oasis New Zealand’ and ‘Oasis Aotearoa’ on different documents, and the teachers were given gifts decorated with Maori motifs when they departed - and food. For instance, the event organiser served asparagus rolls during the Gala Hafla because, she said, they were typical New Zealand party food. These elements seemed selected to help represent a particular model of New Zealandness to the United States participants, but may also have reinforced New Zealand participants’ awareness of themselves as New Zealanders hosting visitors, as it did for me.

³³ For details of New Zealand library holdings of these books, see Chapter 2.

femininity and belly dancing to childbirth and mothering, both in her text and its illustrations,³⁴ says “only a woman’s life experience and sensuality can lend [belly dancing] true meaning and depth”. Both writers emphasise a historical usage of the dance by women, for women. Even though Al-Rawi (1999: viii) hopes belly dancing will help Western women better understand and respect women from other cultures (a belief I have often heard expressed by New Zealand belly dancers), both she and Buonaventura value belly dancing for its femininity, antiquity, spirituality and fertility, all of which are tropes conventionally applied to the undifferentiated Orient. (Indeed, they do not differentiate between Middle Eastern countries and cultures.)

These books also reflect strands of second-wave feminism, including radical concepts of a suppressive patriarchy, but particularly the ideas of cultural feminists like Mary Daly (1978), who reframed ideas about essential female attributes in positive terms, and suggested women’s creativity blossomed through bonding with other women and the exclusion of men (Alcoff 1988: 408-409). They do this in part by drawing on Curt Sachs’ *World History of the Dance* (1937), which asserts ancient, religious, matriarchal origins for belly dance. They fuel fantasies about sensual female community and self-expression via attractive illustrations of happy women, dancing and socialising in traditional Middle Eastern attire (Al-Rawi), and evocative reproductions of Orientalist paintings (Buonaventura), which appear alongside accounts of Middle Eastern women historically belly dancing together in harems. These fantasies and images combine in the harem discourse discussed by Donnalee Dox and Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, and critiqued by Meyda Yegenoglu (1998: 106).³⁵ A second discourse to which they contribute is the myth of the gypsy trail, which posits that gypsies, or other outsider ‘tribes’, preserved and transmitted the dance, adding things to it as they travelled. In her first book, Buonaventura suggests gypsies could do this because of their social marginality, which made them less easy to control (1983: 5). Although she later rejects this view as oversimplistic in *Serpent of the Nile*, the gypsy trail concept remains popular and a number of participants in this study talked about it. It intersects somewhat with accepted history – Ghawazee dancers, who

³⁴ For example, see the captions “the belly is the drum of femininity in dancing” under a photograph of a dancer touching her belly, and “... and in life” under a facing page photograph of two pregnant women on pages 116 and 117.

³⁵ For these writers’ discussion of the way non-Middle Eastern belly dancers positively rework Orientalist constructions of the harem, and Yegenoglu’s critique of some Western women’s fascination with harems, see Chapter 1.

are said to be of Sinti (gypsy) origin, did perform unveiled in public in 19th century Egypt.³⁶ More importantly, it offers an attractive model of defiant femininity that accords with fantasy constructions of gypsies as transgressive outsiders. For some participants in this study, this myth seemed particularly appealing, resonating with ideas of New Zealanders as inventive, innovative people with a penchant for world travel.³⁷

Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (2003) are critical of Buonaventura's work and influence (they do not engage with Al-Rawi, who, however, draws extensively on Buonaventura.). In particular, they point out that men also belly danced historically, and question her assertions that the dance is rooted in roots in fertility rites and childbirth. They note Buonaventura's use of Sachs, "still used as a text for dance history in some institutions" (2003: 20) despite robust challenges to his theories.³⁸ Sachs' ideas stem from a problematic evolutionary theory that concludes that modern 'primitive' people represent earlier stages of western civilisation; the presence of pelvic movements in dances of 'primitive' cultures with minimal intercultural contact indicated to Sachs that all pelvic dances are very old (1937). Shay and Sellers-Young define Sachs' work as Orientalist, due to its overvaluing of both sexuality and spirituality in 'primitive' cultures.

These ideas nonetheless seem to retain significant appeal. A selection of New Zealand newspaper articles about belly dancing, printed between 1997 and 2007, demonstrates their continued circulation in New Zealand. In his article 'Body language', Sunday Star-Times reporter Nigel Costly (2001: 5) uses *Serpent of the Nile* as his reference for a history of belly dancing. In other articles, dancers themselves say that belly dance is one of the oldest forms of dance, with roots in religious rituals or fertility rites, and that it began variously in Egypt and

³⁶ Khareyya Maazin, one of the few Ghawazee entertainers still dancing, reputedly considers her family to be of non-Egyptian ancestry; Edwina Nearing, reporting on Maazin's teaching, refers to the family as "Nawar ... ethnic gypsies." Wendy Buonaventura also says the ghawazee were gypsies. See:

Nearing, E 2007, *Khairiyya Maazin struggles to preserve authentic Ghawazee dance tradition*, Snakes Kin Studio, San Anselmo. Retrieved July 10 2008, from <http://www.gildedserpent.com/articles25/edwinakhairiyyastruggles.htm>

³⁷ For further examination of participants' responses to this model, see Chapter 5.

³⁸ Overdependence on Sachs in dance scholarship has, for example, been criticised by anthropologists Joanne Kealiinohomoku and Suzanne Youngerman. See:

Kealiinohomoku, J 1969-70/2001, 'An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance', in A Dils & AC Albright (eds), *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut. and

Youngerman, S 1974, 'Review: Curt Sachs and His Heritage: a critical review of World History of the Dance with a survey of recent studies that perpetuate his ideas', *CORD News*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 6-19.

North Africa or in matriarchal India (see Bailey 2007; Beston 1997; Matthews 1998; Moriarty 2004). Some dancers also talk about the gypsy trail (Bailey 2007; Cardy 2001). References to the dance being feminine, 'female' or 'a women's activity' occur in many of the articles (for example Bailey 2007; Beston 1997; Cardy 2001). Most participants interviewed for this study expressed the same ideas when talking about belly dance history, though one or two indicated they did not believe it any more, and in some cases directly referred to Buonaventura and Al-Rawi's books. Some expressed strong attachment to *Serpent of the Nile* even though other dancers criticised it. One said she would "stick up for it" even though people were now "quite scathing about" the book, because it had been a very positive book for her.³⁹ Another said Buonaventura's account of "the temple priestesses" had affected her profoundly, describing her response as an "epiphany".⁴⁰

Belly dance in New Zealand today, then, draws on contemporary globalised belly dance practices and ideas, including long-standing, pervasive beliefs about the dance that reflect some elements of cultural feminism and Orientalist fantasy. In the next section of this chapter I will look at how New Zealand belly dancers got to this point: how ideas about belly dance and belly dance itself were introduced to New Zealand.

Contextualising New Zealand belly dance: a partial history

Histories of belly dance during the 20th century have tended to focus heavily on the role of the United States. As my review of popular books and articles about belly dancing confirmed, most begin with a reiteration of fantasies about ancient fertility rites, travelling gypsies and harem women, before switching focus to the 'West' with the arrival of belly dance in the United States, via impresario Sol Bloom, at the Chicago World's Fair.⁴¹ While Middle Eastern dance was demonstrated at 19th century expos outside the United States, the impact of the *danse du ventre* on British or French entertainment, or of Middle Eastern diasporic settlement in western countries other than the United States, is not mentioned. Much of the material available about 20th century developments strongly emphasises the ongoing role of North America. Where modern indigenous belly dance is given a place in belly dance histories, most

³⁹ YH, personal interview, 5th November 2007.

⁴⁰ NW, personal interview, 9th November 2007.

⁴¹ See Chapter 2.

literature (popular and scholarly) centres on Egypt, an emphasis I have retained partly because of the availability of resources, and partly because Egyptian-style dance is particularly influential, both in countries where belly dance is indigenous and within globalised belly dance contexts. Bringing New Zealand into the field of non-indigenous belly dance study can allow us to understand better the processes by which the dance has become globalised. In the following sections, I will re-present a partial history of belly dance as it has developed throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, in which I explore belly dance in North America, Egypt, and New Zealand.

Before belly dance: the exotic in New Zealand and beyond

Fantasies about the mysterious East, centred on titillating depravity and enticing dancers, were already well-entrenched in the Western imagination by the late 19th century, fed by tales from *Alf Layla wa Layla (One Thousand and One Nights)*, Western tourism into the Middle East and North Africa, and, by the late 19th century, a plethora of novels, plays, operas and paintings. Belly dance was almost certainly introduced to the United States as a domestic activity by 19th and 20th century migrants from Arabic countries, but became more widely known as a curiosity demonstrated at the Chicago World's Fair (or Colombian Exposition) of 1893, which quickly became associated with the "salacious and immoral" in North American popular culture (Monty 1986: 29).⁴² Even as North American audiences expressed dismay at seeing the 'revolting' contortions of the shocking *danse du ventre*, however, a vogue for Oriental-themed dances took hold among North American, British and European women. These dances, which in performance often blurred dichotomies between Western and Other, male and female, spiritual and sexual, "played on the imaginary Orient's symbolic value to Westerners as a place where personal identity is liminal, where identities are lost, transmuted, recovered (Studlar 1997: 106)". Dancers acted out "fantasies of sexual excess and power," frequently through portrayals of Salome, the dancing *femme fatale* who combined "Eastern exoticism, independent sexuality and danger" (Keft-Kennedy 2005: 289 - 90).

⁴² Popular and scholarly almost always emphasise the World's Fair rather than diasporic influences, demonstrating how pivotal a role the United States is accorded in global belly dance culture. The patterns of migration that fed into the United States 'melting pot', the role of varied ethnic groups in the United States entertainment industry and the feminist movement all contribute to the way the dance developed, lending credence to this view. However, it downplays migrants' roles and overlooks the likelihood of belly dance being experienced in other western countries with Middle Eastern or North African migrant communities. Drawing on classic Orientalist constructions of East and West, it also tends to position belly dance as an antique discovery revealed to the west, rather than part of a living culture.

New Zealanders also enjoyed indulging in Orientalist fashions and fantasies during this period. Maud Allen, the Canadian Orientalist dancer best known for *Vision of Salome*, toured the country in 1914, two years after Australian actor-director Oscar Asche toured his *Arabian Nights*-style musical production *Kismet* (Hurst 1944). The spectacular follow-up, *Chu Chin Chow*, based on *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and featuring the dervish-like ‘Dance of the Desert Women’, reached New Zealand shores in 1921 (Devliotis 2005: 23). Devliotis notes that the Auckland Amateur Operatic Society presented *Chu Chin Chow* in 1950, suggesting these themes did not lose their appeal in local theatre any more than they did in Hollywood, where fantastical and/or comical Middle Eastern-themed movies were made and remade throughout the mid-20th century.⁴³ New Zealand women, such as Invercargill-born Cecil Hall, who taught in Auckland from 1914 to the 1950s, and her students, also enjoyed performing “Oriental” dances themselves during this period (Fig. 3) (ibid: 120). However, some New Zealanders also had experiences of material Middle Eastern culture at this time. The original Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was established in Egypt in 1915, and New Zealand troops were again stationed in the Middle East during World War II, returning with stories, souvenirs – such as the lengths of antique *assuit*⁴⁴ – some New Zealand dancers recall inheriting from their grandmothers – and even some Arabic words and customs.⁴⁵ GQ, a participant in this study, said her father’s stories about wartime Egypt sparked her own interest in studying its dances.

He used to tell me about going to see belly dancers.... And [the troops] were all so badly behaved they had to have wire netting between the troops and the orchestra to stop things being thrown!⁴⁶

⁴³ Versions of *The Thief of Baghdad*, for example, were made in 1924, 1940, 1961 and 1978. Laurence Michalak also observes that there was a significant number of Middle Eastern-themed films that were of a more serious nature throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s. See:

Michalak, L 1988, *Cruel and unusual: negative images of Arabs in American popular culture*, ADC Research, Washington DC.

⁴⁴ The Art Deco-like geometric designs of this Egyptian fabric, also known as *tulle bi telli*, made it popular eveningwear during the 1920s, and garments made of it can be seen in Hollywood Oriental-themed films from *Intolerance* (1922) to *Samson and Delilah* (1950). North American belly dancers (most notably Jamila Salimpour in the 1960s) popularised it as a more ‘ethnic’ costume style and it remains popular in folkloric and tribal costuming.

⁴⁵ GQ observed that her father, stationed in Egypt for some years during WWII, used Arabic to issue some instructions and also credited his preference for water at the dinner table to his experiences there. The column “Johnny Enzed in the Middle East,” which appeared in *NZEF Times* (the newspaper of the second New Zealand Expeditionary Force) during the war, also demonstrates extensive casual use of Arabic words and phrases by New Zealand servicemen. See:

Webber, E & Colvin, N 1944, *Johnny Enzed in the Middle East*, Rotorua and Bay of Plenty Publishing, Rotorua.

⁴⁶ GQ, personal interview, 26th November 2007.

The dancers GQ's father saw were performing during what is often referred to as the Golden Age of Egyptian belly dance. While North Americans, New Zealanders and other Westerners were enjoying fantasies of antique exoticism during the 1920s, Egypt was experiencing a new impetus towards modernity under British colonial rule. As Anthony Shay (1999: 134) observes, this saw upper-class urban Egyptians distance themselves from lower and rural classes "still mired in Oriental backwardness," including a certain distaste for local entertainment styles. For Shay (2002: 132), this grew out of their internalisation of British values and attitudes, as "colonised individuals", but as Lisa Pollard (2000) points out, the adoption of 'Western' values also benefited Egyptian nationalists trying to prove Egypt modern enough to be independent. The modern belly dance nightclub floorshow, featuring a solo female dancer in elegant two-piece costume and veil, was created at this time and grew in popularity over the coming decades.⁴⁷ Called *raqs sharqi*, and incorporating certain Western elements including a more upright, balletic posture and greater use of the dance space, this dance was presented to upper-class Cairenes and British expatriates as a more sophisticated, yet still Oriental, entertainment than everyday *raqs baladi* ('country' or local dance). Further reworkings of the dance took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when first the Reda Troupe and then the National Folkloric Troupe of Egypt began producing successful theatrical presentations of regional Egyptian dances which presented a conservative nationalistic vision. These troupes, significantly influenced by Hollywood musicals and Russian ballet, created a "'new' Egyptian folk-inspired dance genre – in Hobsbawm's (1983) terms an 'invented tradition,' in which romanticised narratives of peasant life and "sanitised" movements affirmed the refinement and modernity of the urban upper classes" (Shay 2002: 135 - 136).

Despite this new impetus towards sophistication, attitudes towards professional belly dancers remained, and remain, ambivalent in many Middle Eastern cultures. Edward Said (2001) observes of Egyptian dancer Tahia Carioca, a key figure of the Golden Age, that she simultaneously embodied, transcended and problematised "a culture [i.e. Egypt's] that ha[d] featured dozens of dancers... most of them treated as barely a notch above prostitutes" (ibid : 349). He writes that her artistry and political militancy placed her in "the world of progressive women skirting or unblocking the social lanes" but because her "immediately sensual" sexual

⁴⁷ This is usually credited to Lebanese businesswoman Badia Masabni, a former dancer, actress and singer who owned and managed several nightclubs in Cairo and taught dancers Samia Gamal and Tahia Carioca.

public display remained “endlessly deferred... totally unconsummated and unrealisable,” Carioca also embodied the eroticised feminine fantasy that is a hallmark of Orientalist discourse (ibid: 350). This fantasy figure was soon to resurface in North America, in a new guise that combined an illusory authenticity and the Orientalist dance tradition of white women masquerading as exotic Others.

In the United States, the musical and social interests of an ongoing wave of Middle Eastern migrants led to the development of a “polyethnic nightclub culture” in the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting a post-World War II “melting pot” culture and creating new spaces for the embodiment of Orientalist fantasies which included the employment of belly dancers (Rasmussen 2005: 174). The renewed interest in Oriental themes during the 1950s and 1960s coincided with a wave in women’s sexual and political liberation, similar to that which, according to Studlar (1997), fuelled the early 20th century Orientalist craze. Belly dance was promoted as a means by which North American women could explore and express their sexuality, most notably via LPs with instructional booklets that promised to teach women how to put on an intimate belly dancing show.⁴⁸ The nightclub dancers were usually white North American women who trained on the job, learning from migrant women and the occasional professional dancer engaged from Turkey or Egypt, and incorporating elements of their own dance training and audience-pleasing fantasies (Rasmussen: ibid). These women generally adopted Arabic personae, including names, to add a further level of ‘authenticity’ to the nightclub fantasy.⁴⁹ As Nicolas Mirzoeff (1999: 131) might observe, these dancers, club owners and musicians participated in a transcultural process that saw “the acquisition of certain aspects of a new culture, the loss of some older ones and [their resolution]...into a coherent body.”

The late 1960s – early 1980s saw some North American-trained belly dancers (most notably Morocco and Aisha Ali) carrying out ethnographic research trips to the Middle East

⁴⁸ See in particular

Little Egypt presents: how to belly dance for your husband 1968, Roulette Records SR-42021, USA.

⁴⁹ Dancers from the period have noted that pretending to be Arabic was part of the job. Amina Goodyear writes that she and her friends wore their hair long and dark, or wore wigs so “we could look Arabic and keep our job.” Aziza notes that in the early days, dancers “had to have accents when we talked to the customers”. Their employers or teachers often selected performance names for them. See:

Aziza 2007, *Working at the Baghdad*, Snakes Kin Studio, San Anselmo. Retrieved 27 October 2008, from <http://www.gildedserpent.com/articles6/Azizacolumn2.htm>,

Goodyear, A 2007b, *Smokin'*, Snakes Kin Studio, San Anselmo. Retrieved 27 October 2008, from <http://www.gildedserpent.com/art40/Aminachapter4.htm>

and North Africa. Unlike previous first-time Western visitors, these dancers already knew how to belly dance; they could thus only encounter indigenous techniques and contexts through bodies that had already incorporated belly dance movements, and minds whose initial fantasies about the dance (whatever form they had taken) had been tempered by its practice. Fantasies and the desire for transcendental experiences through belly dance, of course, survived, but the techniques they brought back became part of existing repertoires and were evaluated in terms of the kinaesthetic qualities and cultural relevance that made them ‘authentic.’⁵⁰ The (putative) one-way trail that saw belly dance arriving in North America with migrants, taught to local women and transformed into a local hybrid had doubled back upon itself. This meant at least some belly dancers at both ends of this trail would have begun to experience belly dance in a more complex way, informed by each others’ ideas and practices.

For some of these North American dancers, engaging with the ‘source’ through ethnography led to an intense desire to find, preserve and perform essential, ‘authentic’ native dances, like those Aisha Ali recorded in Egypt and North Africa in the late 1970s/early 80s. For others, meeting a modern belly dance that did not conform to fantasies of changeless antiquity and feminine power (particularly given the low social status accorded most professional belly dancers) provided a rationale to take the dance in other, consciously hybrid, directions. Paul Monty (1986), for instance, identifies a uniquely American belly dance tradition linking back to Ruth St Denis and other ‘mothers’ of modern dance.⁵¹ Masha Archer⁵² (in Rall 1997), taking a more extreme view, favoured creating eclectic hybrids based on “the American concept of taking liberties with authenticity and origins,” on the grounds that “Middle Easterners [were] unfit for the job of caretakers” of belly dance.

By the 1970s, “thousands of women” were learning and performing the dance in North America (2003: 25). As the nightclub craze waned,⁵³ the dance began being promoted as a

⁵⁰ For instance, United States dancer Sadira writes that she and others committed to rigorous study of indigenous belly dance’s origins and traditions, reproducing the dance “as authentically as possible,” after seeing the Ghawazee-style dance Aisha Ali brought back from Egypt in 1974. “Dancers wanted more information, more challenges to what they were taught, more expression, and wanted the delight of actually knowing the origins of a dance’s particular style...they ... made sacrifices to take classes diligently from Aisha Ali, travel to Egypt and Tunisia/Morocco to learn from the dancers themselves.”

Sadira 2002, *Aisha Ali and the Birth of the Ghawazee*, Snakes Kin Studio, San Anselmo. Retrieved July 23, from <http://www.gildedserpent.com/articles17/sadiraishaalighawasi.htm>

⁵¹ As Monty’s thesis points out, St Denis, who was inspired by 19th century Orientalism (including world expositions), taught Serena Wilson, who subsequently became a belly dancer and who published one of the first popular guides to belly dancing.

⁵² Archer, who taught ATS originator Carolena Nericcio, was a student of Jamila Salimpour.

⁵³ See

women-only performance art, with roots in ancient fertility rituals and childbirth. These ideas were partially rooted in popular ideas about dance history at the time (particularly the work of Curt Sachs, as discussed earlier) and partially in some of the observations dancer-ethnographers made on their travels. They were also consistent with some aspects of the second wave feminist movement, as we have seen.

Belly dance in New Zealand

Three of the New Zealand-born dancers who participated in this study began learning to belly dance during the 1970s, two of them in North America. Although the two oldest dancers, OY and IB, spoke enthusiastically of participating in social dancing during the preceding decades, all three felt that New Zealand offered few opportunities for women to engage in recreational movement, other than sport, at that time. New Zealand women in the 1970s and 1980s certainly had dance role models; professional ballroom and jazz dancers could be seen on television throughout the 1970s, and by the late 1970s New Zealand's professional ballet and modern dance groups were successful and well known (Longdill 1980: 17).⁵⁴ However, the choices available may not have suited married women and/or those with young children, who were probably less likely to take up a partnered style without their husbands or participate in the newly-popular "disco-style social dancing" in nightclubs (Longdill 1980: 17). GQ, who took up belly dancing early in her marriage, admitted it took "quite a bit of nerve" to tell her husband she was going out to a dance class without him. She also felt women of her generation who liked dancing fell into a "nothing gap" and were "looking for something new and exciting and interesting."

It was before jazzercise. You were too old for ballet, you probably didn't want to do tap – there was no adult movement class apart from something to keep the elderly moving... If you weren't particularly sporty and didn't play netball... there really wasn't anything.⁵⁵

Monty, PE 1986, *Serena, Ruth St Denis, and the Evolution of Belly Dance in America (1876-1976)*, PhD Thesis, New York University.

⁵⁴ For instance, footage from the 1976 Telethon (a 24 hour live broadcast for charity) features sophisticated performances from both male and female dancers, including a cabaret drag act, Polynesian dancing (including fire poi) and a performance of disco dance "The Bump". See TVNZ on Demand, Highlights from Telethon in 1976, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vv4VRljK-nQ>.

⁵⁵ GQ, personal interview, 26th November 2007.

The model of belly dancing as a way for women to socialise, keep fit and express themselves together *as women* was also perhaps a good fit for New Zealand at this time. Many New Zealand women were negotiating contradictory ideas about women's roles, that interwove old ideals of domestic work, reliance on men and sexual chastity with newer ones centred on working outside the home, independence, and sexual expression (Novitz 1989: 62 - 63). Group activities for women were part of the New Zealand social landscape – the early suffrage and temperance movements, rural women's networks, feminist consciousness-raising groups and women's sports teams, while diverse in intent, resonate with what Austin Mitchell calls a "Women Together" alternative to New Zealand's "Man Alone" archetype (2002: 173). They were also part of "a society whose members had, for the most part, always looked outwards," particularly for ideas about music, dance and entertainment (Butterworth 1989: 152-153). Belly dancing arrived as a new mode of female self-expression, to learn and share with other women, and came from overseas. Because it did not require a male partner, it offered independence while seeming to pose minimal threat to existing heterosexual relationships.

According to participants in this study, the first New Zealand belly dance classes probably took place in the mid-1970s in the North Island. (Fig. 4) One participant identified a Canadian dancer known as Lali or Laila, based in Hamilton in about 1975, as New Zealand's first belly dance teacher. However, a second participant said when she tracked Lali/Laila to Auckland the following year, she found several belly dance teachers already in place. Classes became available in both Wellington and Christchurch around 1982, taught mainly by New Zealand-born or North American women who had studied belly dancing in North America or Australia, and in Dunedin in the early 1990s. There was also significant input from Middle Eastern migrants during these early years, particularly in Auckland. GQ found Middle Eastern as well as New Zealand-born teachers in Auckland. In 1979, *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* reported "bored Auckland housewives" stamping "bell-bedecked feet" in a church hall under the long-term tutelage of an Egyptian man, Farouk Darwish (Langwell 1979: 15). Several dancers from Wellington recall taking lessons with Middle Eastern migrant women during the early 1980s; there were also informal classes at Lincoln (near Christchurch) offered by a Middle Eastern woman at this time. However, participants' responses bore out my expectation that most New Zealand belly dance classes have been taught by non-Middle Eastern women. There was no cohesive national belly dance-focused community in the 1970s and early 1980s; it is quite possible that there was belly dancing in other New Zealand towns and cities at this time of

which the participants in this study were unaware. Further and wider research into these earlier years, and into the involvement of Middle Eastern migrants, would be valuable.

Almost all the dancers I spoke with who began teaching in the 1970s or early 1980s first studied the dance outside New Zealand. They generally started teaching, albeit with little experience, in venues ranging from private homes and community halls to professional mirrored dance studios, because they wanted to continue dancing and there were no classes in their area. Although one dancer received hate mail and disguised herself when performing professionally during the early 1980s, to avoid being recognised by her daytime employer, and another was accused of exploiting women by her local La Leche League branch, in general most said both performances and classes were enthusiastically received in their regions. They agreed, though, that the quality of local belly dancing in these early years was mostly not very good, due to dancers' geographic isolation and lack of knowledge and experience.

We learned figure eights, hip circles, a very energetic sideways hip thrust. Also one to the front.... really it was bump and grind stuff.⁵⁶

They reported feeling extremely isolated when they started teaching. Many recalled finding out about other local classes and belly dancers elsewhere by word of mouth through friends, or by chance, spotting advertisements or articles in local newspapers and magazines. Opportunities to learn more and share resources were eagerly pursued.

I was pretty astounded when I saw some other belly dancers from Palmerston who actually moved around, walked you know, with steps.... I'd met a dancer from Auckland and she was very concerned that we couldn't even do a step touch walk after eight months, so she invited me and my sister to go up to Auckland for the weekend, which we did.⁵⁷

Music and costuming materials were difficult to get. Unidentified music on "muffled tapes" of uncertain origin was commonplace, although those who travelled to Australia regularly or who performed in restaurants owned by Middle Eastern migrants tended to have access to more and better music. Many dancers spoke proudly of their creative solutions to a lack of suitable costuming materials, which included using pet bells, hardware chain and local copper and silver coins (still legal currency) as decoration. This state of affairs continued well

⁵⁶ GQ, personal interview, 26th November 2007.

⁵⁷ NW, speaking of the early 90s, personal interview, 9th November 2007.

into the 90s in some communities. Costumes were not available to purchase before about 1996, “and even then many dancers remained unaware.”⁵⁸ Videos were imported from Australia or the United States and were prohibitively expensive; piracy was the obvious solution.

Suddenly the video went round everybody and everybody did a copy, and if you got the 99th version, all the colour was out of it and you got the black and white copy with flashes of colour occasionally when it worked. But the information was fairly jealously guarded by those ... who had gone to a great deal of effort and expense to get [it].⁵⁹

The already strong North American influence consolidated when an Auckland dancer began travelling to the United States annually, starting in the early 1980s, to study with California teacher Jamila Salimpour, with whom she had made contact after meeting one of Salimpour’s students in Powell Street Station, a club featuring belly dancers, while holidaying in San Francisco. Attending Salimpour’s class was “absolutely devastating” as she realised how little she knew. “What we’d been doing was nothing like the way that it could be.” She subsequently brought a number of United States-based teachers to New Zealand during the latter 1980s and early 1990s, including Amaya of New Mexico, her former dance partner and mentor Bert Balladine, Sharifa, ethnographer Aisha Ali, Cassandra Shore, and Shareen el Safy.⁶⁰

During this period some dancers also subscribed to the United States belly dance journal *Habibi* and began importing music (first on tape and later CD), books and videos to sell. In Wellington, North American-born teachers who had trained in the United States were also using resources they had brought with them, including choreographies. Thus, North American approaches, which then centred mostly on movement quality rather than cultural context, dominated the North Island scene by 1991, according to one participant. Dancers were taught steps and choreographies, “all of which came from America” and assumed stories about the dance originating in goddess worship were true.⁶¹

⁵⁸ XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007. However, IB says she used to import costuming from the United States during the 1970s.

⁵⁹ GQ, personal interview, 26th November 2007.

⁶⁰ GQ said New Zealand dancers would have liked to work with Middle Eastern teachers as well but the cost of bringing them was prohibitive.

⁶¹ XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007.

The arrival of British-based Suraya Hilal's teaching methods (via an Auckland dancer who had studied with her) in the early 90s "provided structure that had been missing" and led to a more disciplined and codified approach to the dance.⁶²

Before that it had been oh, it's OK, everybody looks different and we move differently, and it was just basically it doesn't matter, you could do it whatever damn way you liked. ... Hilal said there is a wrong way and there is a right way, and that appealed to a lot of people.⁶³

For some, however, Hilal style became "something to be endured" due to its perceived asexuality and lack of joy.⁶⁴ Critics also pointed out that Hilal's *raqs sharqi* and *baladi*, strongly influenced by contemporary theatre dance practices, were not the authentic indigenous dances their names implied.

A group of Auckland dancers formed the Middle Eastern Dance Association of New Zealand (MEDANZ) in 1991, which aimed to promote the dance and encourage the "effective sharing" of information ('MEDANZ inaugural meeting minutes' 1991). The association established a library of books and videos from which members could borrow, and aimed to be seen as "highly professional" in ways that gelled with Hilal's philosophy.⁶⁵

They didn't want any sort of sexual connotation whatsoever.... Dancers were *not* to be having all that fun and humour... It had to be taken very seriously.⁶⁶

Several dancers spoke of the early 90s period as becoming frustratingly 'politically correct' as these new conventions started to emerge on the New Zealand scene. More than one participant recalled dancers who had broken the 'rules' being confronted.

Everything had to be proper. You couldn't wear coins if you were doing oriental... You couldn't wear beads if you were doing this, and you can't mix coins and beads. I [wanted to] just break all the rules.⁶⁷

⁶² XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007.

⁶³ XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007.

⁶⁴ GQ, personal interview, 26th November 2007.

⁶⁵ MV, personal interview, 1st November 2007.

⁶⁶ MV, personal interview, 1st November 2007.

⁶⁷ NW, personal interview, 9th November 2007.

The ongoing development of new opportunities to study with visiting Egyptian teachers in Australia throughout the 1990s also had an influence, paralleling the consolidation in the United States of a trend towards Egyptian-style *raqs sharqi* instead of American cabaret. At the same time, American Tribal Style belly dance, developed in the late 1980s and arriving in New Zealand close to a decade later, offered an alternative for North American women who preferred a more ‘earthy’, communal and sometimes explicitly feminist belly dance experience. Drawing on Jamila Salimpour’s late 1960s Orientalist pastiche Bal Anat, created expressly for the Renaissance Faire, ATS offered a “postmodern pastiche of materials, design elements and colours,” along with a powerful, aloof, flamenco-inspired posture and distinctive group improvisational format (Sellers-Young 2005: 286). The New Zealand dancers interviewed who specialised in tribal style dance almost unanimously described their attraction to this very different mode of belly dance as instantaneous and deeply emotional.

I loaned this video of [founder Carolena Nericcio’s troupe] Fat Chance [Belly Dance], and it barely played at all ... And I don’t know what it was, I just looked at these women and just something in my chest went ohhhhh. Ohhhh, yeah, *that!*⁶⁸

Sellers-Young (2005: 284-5) observes that early tribal “existed in a fictive Orient,” created from “a mix of the ‘lived’ body of Middle Eastern dancers and a media representation of the Middle East” drawn from National Geographic images and Orientalist art. The international explosion of tribal belly dance and its derivatives suggests the style may trigger deep-seated Orientalist fantasies that are no longer so easily satisfied by conventional belly dance, due both to the latter’s restrictive ‘rules’ and growing emphasis on correct cultural contextualisation, and to the greater availability of information about belly dance in Middle Eastern countries. André Gide’s 1899 description of dancing women, “heavy and tall, not so much lovely as alien, and adorned to excess ... mov[ing] slowly” and suggesting a “secret and powerful” pleasure, could well be applied to ATS dancers (in Karayanni 2004: 103). Tribal’s seemingly radical reinterpretation of belly dance for the 1990s paved the way for a plethora of new ‘fusions,’ largely popularised outside the United States via the internet and DVD, which allow participants to blend belly dance with other subcultural interests, such as Gothic music, body modification, and other movement forms. Unlike Bal Anat and ATS, or other earlier reinterpretations such as ‘goddess’ belly dance, these new interpretations do not necessarily

⁶⁸ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007.

even draw on overt fantasies of the Orient, though they do continue to be grounded in fantasies of alternative presentations of self.

New Zealand in the global belly dance world

The longest-term participants who had remained actively involved in the wider New Zealand belly dance community generally agreed that dancers overall were now much more knowledgeable and skilled. KT, who learned to belly dance before coming to live in New Zealand and was initially “shocked” at local dancers’ low skills and knowledge, observed a “breathtaking” rate of development during the past decade.

People learned so fast and absorbed everything that was taught to them – I couldn't believe it. New Zealanders are like sponges. I experience this over and over again in every workshop I take. The overall standard of dancing is now as good as in any other Western country.⁶⁹

This is in no small part due to the increasing availability of more specialised teaching, either in person from touring master teachers, or in the form of digital media. Performance and teaching DVDs featuring North American dancers and Middle Eastern music distributed by United States, German and British labels,⁷⁰ for instance, are now readily available to buy on the internet. Resources are also very easy to find – a Google search on ‘belly dance’ returned 9,990,000 hits, ‘belly dance teachers’ 4,860,000, ‘belly dance CD’ 2,570,000 and ‘belly dance DVD’ 473,000.⁷¹

Specialist United States-based websites for belly dance discussion serve as a networking arena for (mostly) English-speaking belly dancers in many countries.⁷² They recirculate dominant United States conventions while also allowing belly dancers to express differences, for instance in local attitudes to belly dance or variations in practice. The video-sharing website YouTube offers participants new ways of experiencing and sharing belly dance performances, including a far wider range of material than they would previously have been exposed to.

⁶⁹ KT, personal interview, 25th November 2007.

⁷⁰ Such as United States based Arabic pop label Ark 21, Germany's Pirhana Musik and United Kingdom-based Arc Records and EMI Arabia.

⁷¹ Figures generated on August 30 2008.

⁷² For example, www.bhuz.com, www.orientaldancer.net and the belly dance communities on www.tribe.net and www.livejournal.com.

Excerpts from classic Egyptian films and informal footage of indigenous social belly dancing, as well as modern fusion styles, are easy to find. As John Tomlinson (1999: 4) observes, the ease with which participants can now access these products, images and information may produce a “taken-for-granted” sense of proximity. This, along with the familiarity and accessibility of high-quality English-language productions out of North America, which resemble other imported items of popular culture (like television programmes) for participants in countries like New Zealand, perhaps accounts for why some belly dancers assume agency over the dance with comparative ease.

Although North American and other ‘Western’ participants remain dominant in this economy, North American dancers’ ethnographic explorations in the 1970s paved the way for Middle Eastern and North African people, too, to benefit economically from participation in globalised belly dance. Dancers can now readily purchase costumes (including costly designer styles), hip scarves and accessories made in Egypt and Turkey, along with versions produced in other countries, including China.⁷³ Indigenous specialists – mostly Egyptian folkloric-trained dancers and choreographers – produce their own teaching and performance DVDs and travel internationally to teach workshops, participate in festivals, and perform.⁷⁴ Egypt now hosts two annual, multi-teacher festivals, which generate significant tourist revenue. In 2007 a reported 1200 dancers from 55 countries attended the week-long Cairo festival ‘Ahlan wa Sahlan,’ at which visitors studied, taught, competed, performed, and bought and sold costumes, music and props (Luciano-Adams 2007). The event, established in 1999, also generates “vital tourist spending” on accommodation, transport, further dance lessons and shopping, as participants lengthen their stay and explore the country (ibid.). Such events often intersect with organised dance tours, which allow belly dance fans to combine recreational international travel with their passion for studying and watching belly dance.⁷⁵ The winter 2008 edition of *Bellydance Japan*, for example, advertised a tour to the Rakkasah West festival in California (Fig. 5).

⁷³ I found five Chinese manufacturers of belly dance costumes at http://www.diytrade.com/china/4/products-list/0-k-c-1/Belly_dance_costume.html (retrieved August 30 2008.)

⁷⁴ For example, former Reda Troupe members Mahmoud Reda, Farida Fahmy and Dr Mohammed Geddawi, and ex-Firqua Kawmiyya National Folk Troupe of Egypt dancers Denise Enan and Faten Salama.

⁷⁵ This is consistent with wider trends in international tourism, particularly among so-called ‘baby boomers’ approaching or in early retirement (the age group of many participants in this research) and is not restricted to pilgrimages to the Middle East. “Studies on boomers’ lifestyles show that they like to associate with people much like themselves who have a desire to educate themselves while on holiday.”

Wiseman, P 2007, ‘I want that one!’ in *Travel Weekly Australia*, p. 23, May 11 2007.

“Instead of lounging for days in beach chairs, these ‘connoisseur travelers’ would prefer to spend their vacation days trainspotting their chosen enthusiasm.”

While some New Zealand belly dancers do travel to the Middle East or North America for such events, Australian festivals, such as the Sydney Middle Eastern Dance Festival and Bahar Bayram Balkan and Middle Eastern Dance and Music Camp on the Gold Coast, and the annual MEDANZ festival, are more affordable. They also participate in workshops with international teachers visiting New Zealand, as we have seen in the case of Oasis Dance Camp.

Conclusion

New Zealand belly dancers operate not simply at one end of a trail, but within a series of interconnected global networks. They are now much more likely to know the names of famous dancers and about different styles of belly dance and fashions in costuming around the world, particularly if they use the internet. Such belly dancers are less reliant on local teachers for information and training than in the past, making their own decisions about which DVD to buy or which festival to attend. They may more readily question old assumptions about the dance, due to the availability of different information. Nonetheless, some Orientalist fantasies still underpin belly dance practice, as we have seen, and clearly have value for participants, as Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young indicate (2003: 31-32). In the next two chapters, I will look more closely at the roles of the harem fantasy and the myth of the gypsy trail as they pertain to the experiences of New Zealand belly dancers interviewed for this research. The under-explored gypsy trail model offers non-Maori/Pasifika New Zealand dancers in particular an appealing view of belly dance as already hybrid (yet ancient and authentic), created and disseminated by travelling outsiders. This acknowledges their own recent immigrant roots and the culturally-endorsed New Zealand affinity for international travel. I will return to the gypsy trail in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Despite its increasingly global profile, belly dance retains an emphasis on self-esteem and personal growth for women at a localised, individual level. In the next chapter, I will turn to the ways belly dance and notions of femininity and personal identity may be played out on New Zealand bodies. I also return to Oasis Dance Camp and look at how a United States-rooted version of the harem fantasy played out in the context of the school gymnasium and ski lodge in Tongariro National Park.

Hewitt, E 2007, *Travel Trends 2007*, January 11 2007, from <http://www.independenttraveler.com/resources/article.cfm?AID=717&category=13&page=1>

CHAPTER FOUR

“It’s almost like, you knew you could dance like that but you’re not really allowed to... in Western society”:⁷⁶ dancing bodies, self-image and identity in New Zealand belly dance.

Long associated in the Western world with eroticism and heightened displays of feminine allure, belly dance may seem to sit oddly with perceptions of New Zealand women as earthy, self-reliant participants in an egalitarian, outdoorsy culture (Ramsay 2005: 230). Yet, as we have seen, performance of Orientalist dances, and later belly dancing, wherein women could explore “fantasies of sexual excess and power,” female bonding or both, have appealed to some New Zealand women since early in the 20th century. The “subversive emasculating potential” and ambiguity Virginia Keft-Kennedy (2005: 289) sees in Orientalist *femme fatale* figures like Salome is perhaps no less present in the contemporary “androgynous” presentation of certain powerful and successful New Zealand women, in whom “masculine and feminine qualities exist together” and gender roles and gender power are mixed (Ramsay 2005: 244). As Claudia Bell (1996) points out, this also reflects a wider ‘bloke’ culture in New Zealand, in which women generally de-emphasise sexual difference, particularly when competing with men.⁷⁷

Resources about belly dance available to New Zealand women have tended to focus on its ‘innately feminine’ movements, ideally suited to women’s bodies.⁷⁸ But as both academic researchers (Dox 2006; Keft-Kennedy 2005; Shay & Sellers-Young 2003) and dancers involved in this project have pointed out, the opportunity to wear “nice glittery clothes” and makeup can be one of belly dancing’s key pleasures (Wright & Dreyfus 1998: 8-9). Belly dancing may offer New Zealand women a safe and pleasurable way to experience different modes of femininity, including those centred around the display and sensual enjoyment of their own and other female bodies, without abandoning the wider social benefits women have achieved by being

⁷⁶ EB, focus group, 1st June 2008.

⁷⁷ Indeed, very glamorous feminine presentation may be viewed with suspicion and even fear, as when former Department of Work and Income chief executive Christine Rankin’s long earrings and short skirts were deemed an inappropriate “sexual come-on” by her male superiors. See Gamble, W 2001, *The making of the Christine Rankin legend*, Auckland, August 4 2001, from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/feature/story.cfm?c_id=758&ObjectID=203838.

⁷⁸ See Chapter 2.

“strong, equal and independent and not explicitly feminine” (Ramsay 2005: 230). In this chapter I will look at ways the New Zealand belly dancers involved in this research explored ideas about essential and constructed femininities and the performance of belly dancing as women, but also the pleasures they took in the physical act of belly dancing.

Feminine selves

Many participants in this research said that belly dance allowed them to express a more ‘feminine’ self than usual, often describing it as an ‘escape’ from the duties of motherhood, marriage and paid employment.⁷⁹ Femininity for them did not seem attached to activities that might be conventionally gendered female, such as cooking, making an attractive home or caring for a family. Instead, they largely constructed this femininity either as greater pleasure in and acceptance of a female body (particularly a mature, fleshy one), or in belly dance performance’s hyperfeminine costuming and presentation. BL, who worked in a male-dominated domain, said belly dancing had made her stop apologising “for being the weaker sex... trying to do boys’ things and trying to prove to myself that I’m as good or better than a boy.”⁸⁰ Like several other participants, she felt that belly dance let her actively appreciate being “female... older and overweight.”⁸¹ The opportunity to “dress up, and feel beautiful on the outside” was a large part of the dance’s appeal for many participants and their students;⁸² teachers reported that women who worked at “hard outside labour, gumboot stuff”⁸³ enjoyed dressing up, even during class.

Some participants indicated feeling that belly dance and the accoutrements of makeup and costuming released “the real woman inside.”⁸⁴ However, while most agreed that the dance looked or felt feminine, some were conscious that this femininity might not be inherent in the dance or the female body, but externally imposed. IF said she only considered belly dancing feminine because she was female.

⁷⁹ “The demands of your life are such that it’s never your time. Whereas with belly dancing, it’s my time!” PX, personal interview, 19th December 2007.

⁸⁰ BL, personal interview, 29th November 2007.

⁸¹ BL, *ibid.*

⁸² TC, personal interview, 30th October 2007.

⁸³ CK, personal interview, 21th November 2007.

⁸⁴ LU, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

I don't think of it as necessarily feminine or masculine. It's because we're female we feel like we're doing something feminine.⁸⁵

FC, who is male, noted that the movements looked different on women whose body shapes were less curvaceous and more like a typical man's body.

I think essentially it can be feminine, but a lot of that could just be because ... people think that this is what women typically move like. That's why we think it's feminine - but it doesn't have to be.⁸⁶

Conversely, some dancers said belly dance created an illusion of womanliness, in which they enjoyed indulging because it was so different to their everyday presentation.

It probably helps me to be [a woman] because I have no other reason to sort of dress up, perform and act the part ... you put on the makeup and the costume and the music and you become womanly.⁸⁷

I still don't think I fit the conventional female in many ways, and it's something I turn off and on. It's more like acting than something that's actually in my psyche.⁸⁸

These participants seem to concur with Elizabeth Grosz's (1994: 142) observation that "there is nothing natural or ahistorical" about a body culturally inscribed as feminine (or masculine). This contradicts discourses about the dance being innately suited to a biologically female body. The focus group participants' responses, in particular, implied that the perceived femininity of belly dance may be largely related to cultural expectations, and the fact that most participants are female. Those who spoke about femininity in relation to the act of belly dancing mostly located this femininity in the quality of the movements, rather than in the bodies performing them. The few participants who talked about male belly dancing were, with one exception, very comfortable with the concept. They were generally women who were most interested simply in dancing, not feminine performance or participation in a feminine community. For them, belly dance was an accessible, pleasurable dance form and not a gendered activity.

⁸⁵ IF, focus group, 1st June 2008.

⁸⁶ FC, focus group, 1st June 2008.

⁸⁷ VE, personal interview, 12th October 2007.

⁸⁸ QZ, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

WF expressed her pleasure in being able to look at women in terms of their skilled movements, not the size or shape of their bodies, and looked forward to a time when male dancers would be viewed similarly.

We'll get over it, and it will be just the same as anybody else – oh what nice arms, what beautiful hip flicks, or whatever.⁸⁹

Many participants also seemed to appreciate that their everyday activities – mother,⁹⁰ worker, gardener – as well as personal choices in clothes and grooming – trousers, gumboots, body hair – inscribed their bodies in different ways. Those of Maori or migrant heritage also indicated that their cultural backgrounds played a significant role in how they constructed their personal identities. In general, participants displayed quite nuanced consciousness of themselves as socially constructed; they described multiple identities that could be adopted depending on context.

I see myself as very multi-faceted. Dancer, professional person and mother. The dancer part of me is always there but doesn't always have to be visible or obvious... I think all the parts interrelate.⁹¹

However, they also made broad references to the activities and concerns of women in a collective sense. Their allusions to needing to compete with men in work and the frequent use of the slightly self-deprecating terms “girl” or “girly” to describe ‘feminine’ activities and things (including belly dance) indicated, in my view, a sense that they saw being female as somewhat marginal in wider New Zealand society.

Maureen Molloy (1999: 159), examining presentations of New Zealand womanhood in several local films, points out the significance of the uncanny in representing a female character “caught not only within a cultural and racialised oppression [as Bhabha (1994) suggests], but caught within it as a woman.” Molloy’s interpretation of the uncanny, and its associations with doubles, mirror selves and alter egos, has particular resonance with belly dancers performing an exotic Other self, as explored by writers including Donnalee Dox (2006), Anthony Shay (2003),

⁸⁹ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007. WF believed indifference to a dancer’s sex would occur when a fat man entered the New Zealand belly dance scene, implying – as did other participants – tension between the desire not to objectify male dancers, and the pleasure of looking at conventionally attractive male bodies. Globalised belly dancers’ emphasis on “sensual, not sexual,” which leads to discomfort with objectification, and the discourse of Kiwi egalitarianism are likely both at work here.

⁹⁰ Interestingly, one participant placed “mother” and “woman” in opposition to each other.

⁹¹ JS, personal interview, 20th January 2008.

Barbara Sellers-Young (2005; 2003) and Virginia Keft-Kennedy (2005). For Molloy (1999: 155) the uncanny *is* the feminine, encapsulating “the problematic that the female presents to the Western notion of the unified bounded self.” New Zealand women may not experience overt oppression as a group. However, they do inhabit a culture that conventionally smoothes over not just sexual difference, but differences of ethnicity and class, in favour of an egalitarian ideal which is precarious because difference and inequality are always breaking through. Moreover, highly-visible female authority figures and talk of more multicultural, fluid New Zealand identities in the 21st century disrupt the traditional ‘Man Alone’ model – which, Claudia Bell (1996: 164) points out, positioned women as “domestic monsters who get in the way of mateship” – and do not erase underlying inequalities and tensions.

Donnalee Dox (2006: 59) believes Western belly dancers over-represent the East (with costuming and makeup) to compensate for a sense of being invisible. For Dox (2006: 55) “performing... cultural alterity is vital in Western belly dance”, because this is the only way the Western participant can find herself in the Other. While she observes that this cultural alterity tends to be somewhat underplayed in practice, Dox does not question why some participants so readily erase “ethnicity, class and national culture as categories of difference (ibid).” This may partly be attributable to the sense of proximity engendered by globalisation, but Dox also overlooks the possibility that the alterity women perform is not exclusively cultural (ibid: 59). Rather, as these participants’ responses suggest, they perform the Other in the sense of being ‘woman’. Simone De Beauvoir’s famous maxim “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” is perhaps particularly pertinent for women in 21st century New Zealand (particularly those in their 40s and 50s, the age group of most of the participants in this research) who conventionally pay less attention to the performance of sexual difference. Participants in this research identified more complex, nuanced ways of experiencing identity when they belly dance than simple fantasies of self and Other, West and East, can adequately explain.

Exotic bodies

Constructions of the ‘exotic Other’ woman within Western discourse invariably involve a hidden, and therefore fascinating and mysterious, body, signified by the veiled woman (Yegenoglu 1998). This figure has two facets: the hidden, represented by images of ‘oppressed’ Muslim women, and the revealed, represented by the belly dancer. The belly dancer’s veil is a particularly strong signifier of an ‘exotic identity’ based in fantasies of the Orient, because it

brings both these facets together. As belly dance globalises and many dancers move further away from overt representations of ‘the Orient’ while still claiming the name ‘belly dance’, as in tribal fusion styles, fantasies of veils, harems and other Oriental trappings may no longer play as strong a part in constructing participants’ pleasures. Fascination with a fantasised Orient is also shifting in light both of new interest in cultural contextualisation, and in growing opportunities for New Zealand women to engage with female immigrants from countries where belly dance is indigenous. The underlying significations of fantasy and difference remain, but alongside recognition of the dance as a contemporary cultural activity for contemporary Arabic women.

Meyda Yegenoglu (1998: 43) disrupts Orientalist notions of the veil as either oppressive or revealing by pointing out that an unveiled body is “no less marked or inscribed” than a veiled one; since embodiment is culturally specific, veiling in Muslim contexts is no different than “the control, supervision, training and constraining of bodies” by bras, high heels and cosmetics (ibid: 115-116). She argues that women’s bodies in Muslim cultures are effectively created by the veil, which inscribes and identifies them as Muslim women. The belly dancer’s performative body is also created by the garments and the movements it ‘wears.’ Although for Dox (2006: 55), veils help dancers to perform the “cultural alterity” necessary to “find [themselves] in the Other as represented in the Orientalist frame” – which they then expose through public performance - the responses of two participants who particularly enjoyed veil dancing suggested an intriguing parallel with the power of the Muslim veil, or *hijab*,⁹² to deflect the gaze. BL felt her veil work detracted from less skilful body technique.⁹³ VE, who also referred with pleasure to wrapping herself and “losing” herself in the veil, noted that in performance, “as much as [audiences are] watching you they’re also watching what you’re doing with the veil, and the beauty of the movements of the veil.”⁹⁴

The adoption of an ‘exotic’ performance name may also have *hijab*-like properties.⁹⁵ Rather than revealing a more authentic self, it marks a border, an “extra layer”⁹⁶ between the

⁹² The Muslim concept of *hijab* – modest dress, usually including a veil - effectively both protects women from sexual threat and controls their potentially disruptive sexuality. As Fatna Sabbah has demonstrated, orthodox Muslim discourse locates sexuality primarily in women’s bodies; sexuality is not sinful, but must be safely contained in the domestic sphere. See Sabbah, F (1984) *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, New York, Pergamon Press

⁹³ BL, personal interview, 29th November 2007.

⁹⁴ VE, personal interview, 12th October 2007.

⁹⁵ See the footnotes to Chapter 2 for background on North American belly dancers’ adoption of Arabic or Arabic-sounding names.

⁹⁶ QZ, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

‘real’ self and the performing one, which may offer particular security in light of the widely-accepted convention that New Zealanders are ‘self-effacing’ people who present themselves modestly and without conceit. For QZ, adopting a different name meant it was ‘the belly dancer’, not her, who was “out there, doing the things and having people look at [her].”⁹⁷ However, paralleling Yegenoglu’s assertion that the veil constitutes the woman, numerous participants described their dance name as representing a stronger or larger-than-life part of themselves that, once established, could take charge in other circumstances as well. The ‘persona’ remained intact, although more integrated into their everyday self, even if, like BL,⁹⁸ they later discarded the associated name or, like MV, adopted a new one. WF related how the “more fearless” persona attached to her dance name was also strong enough to handle criticism in other activities.⁹⁹

A significant number of participants had deliberately chosen names that were ‘exotic’ to them but not Arabic, including names they had made up themselves which they felt did not belong to any language or culture. For DM, using a non-Arabic name helped her distance herself from some of her negative beliefs about Arabic culture.

I think there’s a lot that goes on in Arab men’s minds about belly dancers and I didn’t want to put myself in a situation where my name would mean something to them that I didn’t understand myself.¹⁰⁰

One non-Maori dancer chose the Maori version of her own name, which she felt allowed her to access “that more ethnic side” while remaining herself. “I can go to other places but still be me.” Issues of appropriation aside, it seems significant that her choice of a performance identity was drawn not from a realm of entirely fantasised Others, or distant Others from Arabic cultures, but from the culture associated with ethnicity at home. Liu et al (2005: 13) observe that “a contrasting Other” is needed to construct an ethnic self. Here, the dancer uses the idea of a contrasting Other (Maori) not to create a Pakeha/New Zealand European self, but to create an exotic self which nonetheless remains rooted in her local culture. The name is a unique means of re-positioning herself as another kind of Other/not-Other. This, as we will see, is paralleled in performances that render dancers at once familiar, in

⁹⁷ QZ, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

⁹⁸ “I don’t even use the name when I’m dancing because [my real name] is pretty odd as it is. But still, it’s there.” BL, personal interview, 29th November 2007.

⁹⁹ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007.

¹⁰⁰ DM, personal interview, 11th November 2007.

that they are performing recognisable kinds of alterity – belly dancer, glamorous woman, exotic Other - and unfamiliar: not themselves.

The re-imagined harem, nourishment and care of the self

As Dox (2006: 59) notes, belly dancers in North America have tended to reverse the usual Orientalist notion of the sex-segregated harem as evidence of cultural backwardness, adopting instead a “conceptual alternative to Western patriarchy” in which women of all sizes, ages and cultures may bond as women and express themselves freely, without male judgement. Harem fantasies were not prominent in this research, with most participants not directly talking about harems at all. However, the residential event Oasis Dance Camp, held in Tongariro in November 2007 but originating in the United States, drew more overtly on the harem discourse discussed in the introduction and Chapter 3 of this thesis. Indeed, the term ‘harem’ was used to describe the camp living area in both the pre-camp literature and manual. Participants were encouraged to bring decorative items to help give this mundane space a ‘Middle Eastern flavour’.

Oasis offered participants the ‘positives’ of imagined harem life: a relaxed but structured environment centred on female companionship, food and drink, personal adornment (in the form of henna and costuming), music and dancing. Dox (2006: 58) argues that the belly dancer’s harem fantasy “reinforces... a patriarchal social order” and “romanticises women’s subordination” despite its utopian recasting of the harem as an idealised community of women. However, she perhaps misses the self-awareness some belly dancers have regarding the term ‘harem’. At Oasis, images inspired by Orientalist art, like the camp manual’s vintage cover photo of a costumed woman holding a glass of wine (Fig. 6), or the transformation of an unappealing art print into a picture of a veiled woman using a piece of draped fabric (Fig. 7), seemed to deliberately undermine and poke fun at such fantasy.

The harem discourse in belly dance extends to an emphasis on spiritual and emotional nourishment, born of feminine community and movements that are seen as particularly female-friendly. Many study participants seemed much more comfortable with this variant, speaking warmly of belly dance as an activity that allowed them to keep fit and experience “self-acceptance in a world... hostile to women who do not conform to the youthful, slim stereotype

promoted by Hollywood.”¹⁰¹ Many talked of a new sense of comfort with and active pleasure in their bodies. The pleasure of making friends and dancing with them was another major part of belly dance’s appeal for the focus group participants.

It’s really nice [when] you’ve been with those people for a long time, many years. [There is] a nice energy when you ... get up and you do it and you think oh, it’s good, we’re doing this together.¹⁰²

It was also common for participants to position belly dance as a spiritual experience, with one describing it as “soul warming,”¹⁰³ and another saying it played a similar role in her life to religion. Those less moved by notions of an embodied spirituality (who tended to have been dancers in other genres as well) said they enjoyed belly dance primarily as a way of being able to continue dancing and performing throughout their lives, with less damage to their bodies than that caused by ballet or jazz dance.

It’s given me a dance form that ... won’t ruin my body, that I can keep doing forever. I can keep performing.... I turned down the ballet opportunity simply because [I would have had to retire young].¹⁰⁴

The focus group participants spoke about belly dance in terms of a complete package that had little to do with overt fantasies of exotic alterity.

Put it this way, it’s the only exercise that I’ve continued to do for – five, how many? Five and a half years. Nothing else that I’ve taken up inspires me as muchthe music, the performance, you get to dress up - that one’s very important - you get to dress up, and people look at you and go ‘wow, that looks really cool,’ so it makes you feel cool.¹⁰⁵

The idea of personal benefit, rather than broad social benefit, relates also to the effect on globalised belly dance of consumer culture. Indulgence not just in classes but in costumes, makeup, beauty treatments, DVDs, workshops and festivals can be positioned as small luxuries which improve the participant’s physical body. Dancers’ fascination with presenting a groomed and decorated ‘external surface’, along with a dedication to sensual gratification through movement and nourishment, parallels the mirroring, or consuming, body delineated by

¹⁰¹ TC, personal interview, 30th October 2007.

¹⁰² JG, focus group discussion, 1st June 2008.

¹⁰³ PX, personal interview, 19th December 2007.

¹⁰⁴ XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007.

¹⁰⁵ GD, focus group discussion, 1st June 2008.

sociologist Arthur Frank (1991; 1996). However, emphasis on sharing, nurture and community, and the powerful sense of “being comfortable in, rather than alienated from” one’s body, hints at the as-yet-unachieved communicative body (in Shilling 1993: 96-97).¹⁰⁶ Tribal belly dance, which Barbara Sellers-Young (2005) identifies as a post-modern form, may begin to create a communicative body due to its emphasis on group improvisation. Here the dancer’s body does “creat[e] itself through constructive interactions with others” based on via mutually understood movement combinations, which may function as “fully embodied” narratives (Shilling 1993: 97).¹⁰⁷ I will return to belly dance as an embodied practice later in this chapter.

Perceptions of belly dance as nourishment may have contributed to some participants’ descriptions of it as “yummy” or “delicious.” Susan Bordo’s (1993: 119) observation that “[m]en eat and women prepare” has interesting implications for belly dance, because in the female-dominated culture of globalised belly dance, women prepare *and* eat. The New Zealand women’s tradition to ‘bring a plate’ means participants generally bring and share food with their audiences and each other. Celebrating after performances with food and alcohol is common. Since these activities are separate from everyday life, there is some resonance with Bordo’s notion that women may only indulge their appetites in private. However, this is not solitary eating, nor is eating indulgently frowned upon, as the frequent inclusion of chocolate and other rich foods attests. Food is also treated as fuel to support dancers’ increased physical activity. Belly dance events may include training in safe dance and physical recovery techniques (which can include advice about food and liquid intake before, during and after exercise), and opportunities for therapeutic massage. Even participants who may not really push their bodies very hard are encouraged to treat themselves as athletes.¹⁰⁸ Consumption of food and of belly dance are thus constructed as both personal indulgence and body maintenance in globalised belly dance.

¹⁰⁶ Frank proposes the communicative body as an ideal model to be striven for; it is one that expresses, via dyadic sharing, rather than mirrors what is going on around it.

¹⁰⁷ “The thing about tribal is that it’s about following one person and gaining that really odd synchronisation where everyone’s just flowing together. And as soon as you start linking that with beats in the music and doing five counts of that, you lose that flow of dancing with other women and dancing with other people, and suddenly it’s just a bunch of people dancing with the music instead of a bunch of people dancing with each other. And that’s the thing that’s really strong and really core with me, I believe that it’s about dancing with those women and not about dancing with that music.” RA, personal interview, 17th November 2007.

¹⁰⁸ On the day of the Oasis Dance Camp performance, participants were encouraged to eat a large, well-balanced lunch and a light, early dinner in preparation for dancing on a near-empty stomach, after which they would eat again. Although this is also standard practice at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance, which was founded by the New Zealand organiser of Oasis Dance Camp, and possibly reflects one person’s preferences, this approach to eating is consistent with that of other professional belly dancers I have encountered.

Numerous participants also viewed dancing, either privately or in class, as a healthy way of handling stress, which could replace comfort eating or smoking. Interestingly, several focus group participants said they used to dance privately as children or teenagers, but had stopped until they took up belly dance as adults. HE, who loved to belly dance when alone, said it reminded her of the times dancing “took [her] away into [her] own wee world”¹⁰⁹ in childhood, but other participants said they no longer felt completely unselfconscious about dancing unless they were drinking alcohol. They attributed this to the greater pressures they experienced as adult women. IF pointed out that even sitting down to read felt like a guilty pleasure, “because there’s always something to be done.”¹¹⁰ GD elaborated:

I used to do a lot of that, you know, go into the lounge, shut the door and turn the music on and I’d be prancing round in front of the mirrors ... and it was so good, and then as you got older you lost it. And even now I haven’t got it back. Even though I do belly dancing I still feel self-conscious in my own house.... I very seldom have the house to myself any more and I very seldom have time.¹¹¹

Sensual dancing bodies

Proof of “self-mastery [and] control” does not necessarily require slenderness among belly dancers, contrary to Susan Bordo’s assertion about wider consumer culture (1993: 209). A body able to demonstrate difficult or complex technique may be admired regardless of physical size or age, and the belly dancer who masters a new movement generally experiences a sense of accomplishment which has very little to do with whether she is slim or not. However, developments in global belly dance that privilege a lean and tightly muscled body challenge the all-bodies paradigm once prevalent among belly dancers. Wright and Dreyfus’ (1998: 4) assertion that belly dancing “refuses” the “hard bod[y]” aesthetic predates the influence of commodified artists like the United States-based Bellydance Superstars, particularly the extremely lean tribal fusion artist Rachel Brice, whose muscle isolation techniques and disciplined drills result in seemingly otherworldly fluidity and control.¹¹² Similarly, ex-Superstar Suhaila Salimpour’s development of a shimmy produced by isolating and rapidly squeezing and

¹⁰⁹ HE, focus group, 1st June 2008.

¹¹⁰ IF, focus group, 1st June 2008.

¹¹¹ GD, focus group, 1st June 2008.

¹¹² The Bellydance Superstars, created by US music producer Miles Copeland, produce performance DVDs of their stage shows and lend their name to musical compilations for belly dance enthusiasts to buy.

releasing the gluteus muscles, rather than allowing them to shake loosely while generating the movement elsewhere (for example, with the legs) produces a “wobble” that is, paradoxically, “tightly managed.” This conforms to the preferences for a firm, toned, female body that Bordo identifies (1993: 191).

The participants in this study did not indicate that slim, muscular role models or challenging new techniques were necessarily their ideal. VE felt older women particularly liked belly dance because they had already accepted their body’s “lumps and bumps” and were ready to “work with what [they’d] got.”¹¹³ Others cited new comfort with surgery scars or weight gain, even with previous experience of disordered eating. They also indicated that increased facility with the dance, especially after many years’ practice, led to a shift in their perceptions of how the dance operated on (or in) their bodies. JS, who commented “I wear [the dance] much more easily now,” described her pleasure in “overlaying” her own style on base movements rather than working on perfecting technique.¹¹⁴ TC noted that she no longer felt the need to “write the experience down” after classes and now danced to keep herself “emotionally and spiritually in balance,” experiencing stress relief and improved blood pressure.¹¹⁵ Both women described belly dance as having become “natural” to them. However, while the focus group participants also seemed to think of the dance as natural after years of practice - in fact, one admitted having difficulty differentiating it from ‘Western’ dance because it was now so familiar - they almost all remained strongly aware of how they looked when they danced, and took particular pleasure in performing for an audience. For them, belly dance movements and costumes had a special capacity to make all bodies look good, which in turn made them more accepting of both their own and other people’s bodies.

I think it sort of opens your eyes to a wider perception of beauty...You haven’t just got that narrow model type as gorgeous. Because you can see a beautiful dancer that hasn’t got ... what’s classed as a beautiful body.... You see so many different [bodies] and they can look so good, doing different things, that it gives you more confidence in your own, doesn’t it?¹¹⁶

If you feel you look good, you’ll feel good. If you feel that other people might find you

¹¹³ VE, personal interview, 12th October 2007.

¹¹⁴ JS, personal interview, 10th January 2008.

¹¹⁵ TC, personal interview, 30th October 2007.

¹¹⁶ IF, focus group, 1st June 2008.

attractive to look at, not just in a sexy way but in a sensual way, then you feel good as well.¹¹⁷

They also said, however, that gaining increased facility with belly dance movements gave them confidence unrelated to the looks of their bodies, because they felt they could now better control the way they moved and enjoy the feelings of the movements they generated.

Dance sociologist Helen Thomas (2003: 118) proposes that the transmission and embodiment of dance techniques may best be discussed using Bourdieu's concept of bodily habitus. For Bourdieu, the human body becomes a social entity through the physical actions it performs. 'Habitus' is acquired – like a new dance vocabulary – but becomes “incorporated in the form of permanent dispositions” (Bourdieu 1993: 86). A way of moving or doing things thus becomes unconscious, as the movement becomes part of an everyday repertoire. There are limitations to this model; a belly dance performance, for example, will reveal little about participants' social class, which is a key aspect of Bourdieu's work on the body, although a dancer's 'taste' in costumes, music and personal presentation may well be informed both by the dance community in which she participates and her own wider social networks. However, Thomas (2003: 118) observes, Bourdieu's recognition that “bodies have histories, but ... not entirely of their own construction” offers a more effective way to look at how dance techniques are transmitted and embodied than purely discursive or representational models.

Participants in this study reported that movements indeed seemed to become “natural” once they had “learned the moves.” Wider aspects of belly dance culture (including, for example, unselfconsciousness about showing flesh) might also, therefore, be expected to become part of belly dancers' embodied histories.

It's like learning to walk... When you first start it's real hard work but after a while you don't think about it any more. It just becomes incorporated in your brain, and it's the same with the dancing.¹¹⁸

Thomas' observation that the body as constructed by habitus is “not like a set of clothes you can put on or take off at will” seems at odds with some participants' identification of belly dancing selves which are donned, like *hijab*, to deflect hostile gazes. However, as several participants related, the personae they created for protection eventually integrated into their

¹¹⁷ FC, focus group, 1st June 2008.

¹¹⁸ GD, focus group, 1st June 2008.

everyday selves as they developed more facility with performance and more confidence in themselves as dancers. TC said the relevance of her dance name lessened as she developed confidence as a teacher. While her dance persona allowed her “a certain amount of freedom” that she would not otherwise extend herself, she wanted her teaching skills and achievements attributed to ‘T’, not her dance persona.¹¹⁹ Thus, while participants continued to identify multiple personal identities, their dance identities had to some extent infiltrated these other identities as a result of ongoing bodily conditioning, through physical practice.

The participants’ reflections on improved body image, self-acceptance, and experiencing dance on a richer level as they became more adept, parallel Thomas’ (2003: 120) assertion that “unfamiliar movement can become familiar,” allowing dancers to experience, and be enriched by, “a strong sense of knowing in and through the body of the self in relation to others.” This certainly implies that developing physical facility with the movements of belly dance may be as valuable as dressing up and performing. Dance anthropologist Cynthia Bull (1997) cautions against making wider cultural generalisations based on observing dance – the outer, appearing body – and also against focusing on sensual experience – the inner, experiential body – while ignoring the way shared meanings shape actions and perceptions in life. For her, attention to both aspects is critical, given especially an understanding, as Thomas argues, that human embodiment is simultaneously “personal and impersonal, objective and subjective, social and natural” (Turner 1992: 41, in Thomas 2003: 94). Writing about belly dance has thus far tended to focus excessively on observation and analysis of a representational belly dancing body. Little attention has been paid to participants’ kinaesthetic experiences.

It is not possible to extricate belly dance entirely from representation, entangled as it is in fantasies of the Orient and exotic womanhood. However, an exploration of the dance that does not hinge on representation may be useful in understanding belly dance’s appeal as a method of experiencing a different mode of femininity. Contemporary dancer and sociologist Pirkko Markula (2006: 4) observes that “the appearance of the body tends to become the sign” whose meaning audiences interpret; as a result, “the female dancing body is often the object for a traditional, ‘patriarchal’ reading of femininity.” Belly dancers, and women, are thus always positioned as objects of a gaze, signifying something. But as feminist philosopher Moira Gatens

¹¹⁹ The participants who danced under their own given names, rather than dance names, were all professionals whose main livelihood came from dance. This possibly indicates the degree to which dancing is integrated into their perception of their everyday self.

(1996: 33) notes, many feminists criticise the privileging of sight in psychoanalytic theory as “something peculiarly masculine,” arguing that other senses are equally important. Turning to Deleuzian feminism, and its liberatory notion of identities in flux, for a route to presenting a subversive femininity, Markula explored performances that would present feminine identity as “a flow of movement”, initiating movements from the centre of the body – as is the case with belly dance - rather than producing dramatic extensions.

Certain aspects of belly dancers’ embodied experiences seem to intersect with notions of identities in flux, rather than fixed in a signifiatory system. After the kinaesthetic sense – the sensation of movement in the body, which Bull (1997) notes is the one all dancers chiefly experience - belly dance, like ballet, privileges sight, partly because it is a performance art (and therefore viewed) and partly because it is learned by watching and copying.¹²⁰ Non-indigenous belly dancers compound this privileging of sight because they learn through lessons, often using mirrors, with the intent of performing for an audience. Tribal style dance is especially visually-oriented, as participants need to watch each other for cues. Hearing, however, is also particularly important in belly dance, especially in traditional Middle Eastern-style improvisation where response to the music is crucial. The conventional use of coins or beaded fringe on costumes also means participants may hear, and deliberately generate, sounds of their own. My own experience of belly dancing also leads me to consider touch. While belly dancers do not generally touch each other, they do self-touch, for example by placing hands to the forehead or lifting the hair, but more particularly, by creating ripples and folds in their own flesh. The muscular generation of movement from the body’s centre creates a conscious awareness of the interior as well as the exterior of the body. Some women may perceive the movements as feminine not because they often have a quality of softness or roundness, but rather because they draw their awareness to their own centre and to the movement of their own, materially female, flesh.

Facility with belly dance thus may allow a dancer to inhabit her own body in a way consistent with Deleuzian feminist thinking. She may enjoy firstly a sense of femininity that is not “a symptom, effect or product of patriarchal culture,” but “an intensity exerting its own force”, an identity in constant flux which does not need to resist oppressive constructs of

¹²⁰ This analysis follows Bull’s analysis of the role of the senses in ballet and contact improvisation. See

Bull, C 1997, ‘Sense, Meaning and Perception in Three Dance Cultures’, in JC Desmond (ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.

femininity or reveal true ones, because it does not acknowledge these binaries (Markula 2006: 12-13). Secondly, she may inhabit, rather than interpret, her movement by thinking of it in terms of how it works, not what it means, as when the movements become habitual.

When I'm dancing at home, when I just put music on ... I see spirals and circles in my body. [I]t's all in like figure of eights and it's flowing, and for me that relaxes my entire body.... [I like to do] a maya¹²¹ where I can feel I have this amazing control over my hip to slowly, you know, raise it up and then push it out and down. It's that beautiful control, whereas everything else is nice and still.¹²²

Although the focus group participants did report that they generally no longer thought about how they generated belly dance movements, some also said that they became more aware of their bodies as they grew more adept at the dance.

When you start...if you do hip drops, you do hip drops, and the rest of you is like hanging there or whatever. But once you've been doing it for a while ... you are aware of your whole body [such as your upper body and hands].¹²³

Signifying bodies

While Deleuzian ideas about what Markula (ibid: 31) calls a positive, “embodied, molecular femininity” are appealing compared to a binary system where femininity is socially or culturally imposed and oppressive, it is particularly difficult for belly dancers to transcend signification. The conventional trappings of belly dance performance – ornate costuming, bare feet, ‘exotic’ Eastern music, finger cymbals, a veil, and an exposed belly – evoke for any Western viewer traces of Orientalist discourses and constructions of femininity, and spark a desire to analyse and interpret. As Markula discovered during her attempts to create feminist dances, audiences frequently ‘read’ her performances in ways completely opposite to her intent.

As Keft-Kennedy (2005: 292), following Kathleen Rowe, argues, the position of spectacle need not be one of weakness. The belly dancer “possesses much potential for rethinking the notion of ‘visibility in power’.” While the *hijab*-like dance persona and costuming helped some dancers feel less exposed, the professional dancers interviewed were conscious of

¹²¹ A downward vertical figure eight movement of the hips.

¹²² GD describes a pleasurable kind of movement first as an abstract visual and then in terms of its mechanics. Focus group, 1st June 2008.

¹²³ IF, focus group, 1 June 2008.

the power their bodies gave them over men and women. Rather than exert it, though, they were in favour of acknowledging it and moving on to something they found more interesting, which was dancing.

I have ...been careful not to use it as a sexual tool. One dancer I met used to enjoy dancing provocatively in a range of situations as an attention-grabbing technique and also, I thought, as a way of asserting herself over other women. This appalled me and I felt that it was a careless use of the dance and disrespectful.¹²⁴

It's something you've got to be aware of when you're a dancer, that you're very scary to men. You're a woman and you're a sex object and you're saying it's OK – yes, I am a sex object and that's just one of the things I am, so get over it. And also, I am quite powerful because I'm getting up here in front of you, and that's very intimidating.¹²⁵

The belly dancer's capacity to direct the viewer's gaze by drawing focus to a particular body part – or, in the case of tribal dance, to deflect it onto a mass of assertive, audience-indifferent bodies rather than to individuals – demonstrates that “visual power flows in multiple directions” (Keft-Kennedy 2005: 292). FC said he enjoyed the slight sense of transgression he experienced when performing a hip thrust movement.

There is that element of, I want to be slightly more overt, and thrust the hip, so look at my hip. You can think of it in a fun way, you can think of it in a sexual way, but it doesn't matter [which way].

Being able to make eye contact with audience members can also create a feeling of communicating, rather than of solely being looked at, which, GD observed, was “more in tune” with the nature of belly dance. “I mean, what is the point of being up there if there's no connection with the audience?” However, the transgressive act of performing the dance in a costume, on a stage – allowing oneself to be looked at – remained a major factor in making belly dance enjoyable and empowering for many of these participants, particularly those who are not professional performers.

Harem, revisited

The re-visioned global harem – not a literally enclosed, segregated space, but a figurative one, comprising networks of dance opportunities created by, and largely for, the women who

¹²⁴ JS, personal interview, January 10th 2008.

¹²⁵ XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007.

participate in them – lets participants act ‘inappropriately’ by donning revealing costumes and heavy makeup, and dancing with sensual abandon, with a comparative paucity of judgmental (male) spectators. At the same time, discourses around the emotionally and physically positive effects of belly dance practice ensure participants feel confident that their participation is wholesome and healthy. These aspects all mitigate what Keft-Kennedy (2005: 291), following Mary Russo, identifies as the “strategy of danger” on which belly dancers draw.

Almost all the participants in this study said they, their students and friends experienced benefits from the community aspects of belly dancing with other women. In New Zealand, however, women can experience similar benefits from many other gendered group activities, such as women’s sport. I propose that it is belly dancing’s combination of chances to perform extreme femininity, to transgress cultural prohibitions against ‘attention-seeking’, and the pleasurable sensual exploration of movement and music, that is attractive to the New Zealand women who participate. As they grow more adept at performing the movements of the dance, they may develop new appreciation for bodies no longer defined as belly dancers by an ‘exotic’ costume or dance name, but by their movements alone.

Thomas observes (2003: 165) that feminist critics of dance sometimes disdain emphasis placed on the revelation of a ‘natural’ feminine body. But belly dance offers participants a space where the materiality of their female bodies is not denied or underplayed. Discourses around the dance as naturally suited to women’s bodies operate alongside wilful public presentation of a hyperfeminine, highly artificial self. Karayanni (2004: 104) sees excessive adornment and makeup, as well as veils, as invaluable contributors to “the signification process of the exotic subject”; here, though, dancers are not just playing at being exotic, foreign bodies, but creating exotic versions of their everyday selves for their own pleasure. Wright and Dreyfus (1998: 5) view “cabaret” belly dance in particular as “explicitly designed for the male gaze” because of its costuming. But far from considering themselves ‘sultans’ in a ‘harem’, male partners, friends and relations of belly dancers may feel discomfort at belly dance events; there are seldom many men at belly dance shows in New Zealand.¹²⁶ I argue that, far from conforming, the belly dance aesthetic frequently transgresses conventionally-accepted modes of femininity, particularly in

¹²⁶ One male friend expressed discomfort with a sense of ‘too much estrogen’ at belly dance events, and disliked seeing all the women (including his partner) in heavy, dramatic makeup. A participant in this study said she believed that only in New Zealand would one see belly dance shows with no men present, but my observations of international belly dance discussion websites suggest that shows in other countries are also mostly attended by belly dancers, who are mostly female.

New Zealand where even women's formal dress is comparatively casual by international standards.

Apart from the most obvious infringement – public exposure of a belly that may be fat, wrinkled or scarred - the 'conventional beauty' adopted by belly dancers is often marked to the point of parody. Heavy, dramatic makeup and the normative use of false eyelashes, nails and hair (not to mention padded breasts, where necessary) makes the belly dancer less an approachable construct of acceptable feminine beauty than a female impersonator. Indeed, New Zealand dance scholar Mark James Hamilton commented on the "drag-style makeup" of the performers when viewing a show featuring tribal fusion belly dancers for the first time.¹²⁷ Dancers who perform fusion styles adopt particularly idiosyncratic self-presentations, influenced by Gothic, body-modification and Japanese-style cosplay subcultures, which do not accord with generally accepted models of feminine allure. Christchurch tribal fusion group Kiwi Iwi's adoption of a *moko*-like chin adornment, rather than a Berber-style one,¹²⁸ symbolically positions them on the side of indigenous New Zealanders, evoking both wise 'warrior culture' and an underclass characterised by poverty and violence.

As Kathleen Rowe (1995: 6) observes, performances of the feminine "make visible...the gap between an impossible role and the woman playing it." For Luce Irigaray (1985: 76), the deliberate, playful assumption of 'feminine' dress and behaviours via mimesis simultaneously lets a woman hide – "remain elsewhere" – and be visible in a way that is deliberately troubling. Karayanni (2004: 88), too, observes the capacity of makeup and costuming to "invite the gaze, yet guard the body in its creative... vulnerable moments," its application simultaneously inducting the performer into performativity and excluding outsiders. Rather than solely resisting imposed modes of normative femininity by overplaying them, though, New Zealand women may also be interested in resisting cultural injunctions against showing off, being a 'tall poppy.' By adopting a hyperfeminine, even monstrous, appearance, the sometimes 'masculine' or androgynous, 'self-effacing' New Zealand woman can become a "strange and threatening" figure in the familiar school gymnasium or community hall setting (Molloy 1999: 154). Simultaneously, she can experience and express "self-affection" through an "always fluid" interplay of fantasy and materiality that centres around a body, exposed and

¹²⁷ Mark James Hamilton, personal communication, 2007.

¹²⁸ Imitation Berber tattoos, including those worn on the chin, are standard among American Tribal Style belly dancers.

adorned, that is also moving in a fluid, self-caressing way, inviting and yet deflecting the gaze (Irigaray 1985: 79). The ‘femininity’ of this movement may be culturally inscribed, but it draws the female dancer’s attention to the materiality of her own sexed body.

Diana Fuss (1989: 71-72), examining Irigaray’s theorisation of a “woman’s essence,” points out that embracing ideas about essential femininity does not necessarily reduce women to their bodily parts; for Irigaray, Fuss argues, claiming feminine essence is a strategy to give women value on their own terms in a Western binary philosophical tradition which denies them subjectivity. Moreover, playing with a tradition centred around a fascination with veiling and unveiling reiterates, but also confounds, a spectator’s desire; lifting the veil reveals only more veils – assumed names, reflective costumes, false eyelashes. Women in New Zealand can shift between gendered polarities within a ‘masculinised’ dominant culture but are ultimately rendered ‘uncanny’ and dangerous by their sex. The choice to “be the belly dancer”¹²⁹ lets them revel in the anxiety-producing otherness and uncanniness that lies beneath both the “deviant but acceptable” androgyne of New Zealand politics that Ramsay (2005: 244) identifies, and Bell’s (1996: 164) mateship-disrupting “domestic monster.” Simultaneously, the pleasure of belly dance movement allows them to enjoy their bodies in multiple ways that may or may not be related to ideas about gender, or even about performance. While like all belly dancers, they carry the weight of Orientalism representationally, their creation of performative identities and embodied experiences may be less clear-cut. For many of the women interviewed, being a belly dancer is not inconsistent with being “a gardening girl, a gumboot girl.”¹³⁰ It is significant that the dancer persona, initially new and ‘exotic’, is ultimately perceived as just another facet of self, or one of multiple selves.

Multiplicity is disruptive given New Zealand’s historical emphasis on sameness and unity, but is also pertinent to a New Zealand identity construction. For Hoey, (2004: 199), Pakeha/non-Maori in New Zealand have had the experience of being both coloniser and colonised “if only in the mind, in the way they have regulated themselves according to the myths of the colonial process”; New Zealand people today also increasingly experience colonisation via global media, responding by further articulating more complex local selves. They may acknowledge multiple personal cultural identities, but still adhere to the wider norm

¹²⁹ PX, personal interview, 19th December 2007.

¹³⁰ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007.

of living in a singular culture that resists homogenisation through globalisation, while sitting uneasily on its own foundations of cultural exploitation. During this research, talk about the sensual pleasure and performativity of belly dancing became a way to talk about New Zealand cultural conventions. In the next chapter, I turn to transculturation, and the ways that belly dance, local identities, migration and globalisation play out together in a New Zealand context.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I mean, what is a Pakeha New Zealander’s national dance? We don’t have one.”¹³¹ belly dance and transculturation

Belly dancers’ awareness of, and pleasure in, the material body both supports and undermines popular notions of the body in consumer culture. As we have seen, the attention (and financial investment) of participants in decorating and celebrating bodies toned and strengthened through belly dance coincides with an emphasis within consumer culture on body maintenance and appearance, through which the newly-disciplined body becomes a route to “individual expressivity” (Thomas 2003: 52). Conversely, dancers’ reports of experiencing new pleasure in their existing bodies regardless of size or age, their gleeful enjoyment of rich food and alcohol at belly dance events, and their admiration for unconventionally shaped but able bodies, resist pressures to control their own body size or admire only socially sanctioned shapes. The dance is thus positioned as a means of nourishing the self, both emotionally through practice of the dance and sensual female community, and literally, through its association with food.

As Sneja Gunew (1994: 61) observes, food is “one of the few non-threatening ways to speak of multiculturalism.” This observation may also be extended to dance; the multicultural food festivals Gunew describes often also include presentations of ‘ethnic’ dances. Like these festivals – at which the belly dance is usually presented by Pakeha New Zealanders - belly dance may liven up the “dull dish” of mainstream New Zealand culture in the same way as a meal at a Middle Eastern restaurant (hooks 1992: 21). However, just as the application, context or taste of foods may change through relocation to a different cultural setting,¹³² so belly dance

¹³¹ SB, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹³² There are numerous instances of imported foods being recontextualised in a new cultural milieu; for instance, in England the doner kebab, usually eaten for lunch in Turkey, has become a conventional finale to a night of heavy drinking, while in New Zealand, the Lisa’s Hummus range includes one flavoured with popular local products pumpkin, kumara and feijoa. See

van der Zee, B 2006, ‘Kebab, anyone?’ *The Guardian*, October 26 2006. Retrieved July 3 2008, from

– when and where it is practiced, how it is practiced and how it is interpreted – is modified by the specific culture in which it is located.

In this chapter I examine several New Zealand dancers’ reflections on belly dance practice within a New Zealand cultural context. In particular, I look at the conscious hybridisation of Middle Eastern and Pacific cultural influences in the performances of Christchurch tribal fusion troupe Kiwi Iwi, and contrast their process with my own exploration of an Egyptian cultural stereotype in performance of a *melaya leff* dance. I will also look at the ways in which participants in this study talk about belly dance in relation to themselves as New Zealanders, partly drawing on the shared discourses of globalised belly dance to justify their involvement in the dance form, but also demonstrating a high level of awareness of issues surrounding cultural appropriation, representation of different cultures in their dance, and their own participation in a globalised world.

Belly dance – a New Zealand thing?

In Arjun Appadurai’s (1999: 229) terms, a globalised world is a decentred one, where people, technologies, capital, images and ideas are caught up in “global cultural flows” which engage in “continually fluid and uncertain interplay.” Globalised belly dance reflects Douglas Kellner’s engagement with the “McDonaldisation” model proposed by George Ritzer (1993). Kellner (2003: 39) suggests that while McDonald’s does signify a “mode of homogenisation, massification and standardisation,” it may nonetheless be experienced in different ways due to participants’ diverse genders, ethnicities, class and geographic locations. New Zealand belly dancers thus engage with the globalised belly dance model in multiple ways. Globalised belly dance’s “cultural pedagogy” constructs it as a means of exploring personal identity, as we have seen; discussion with the New Zealand belly dancers who participated in this study also created an opportunity to examine some ideas about national identity.

During the course of the interviews and focus groups, it became clear that while we all had different ways of positioning ourselves, as a group of New Zealand-resident people we also drew on some shared ideas about New Zealandness. Some participants jokingly suggested that non-Maori/Pasifika New Zealanders lacked ‘culture,’¹³³ but overall, the responses demonstrated

¹³³ As when WF shared what she defined as “a Maori joke against Pakeha – what’s the difference between yoghurt and Pakeha? Yoghurt’s got culture.”

that participants shared a fairly strong belief in a distinct New Zealand culture, albeit one that might be difficult to articulate because it was so familiar. “We must [have a culture],” WF observed, “but when you’ve been living it you can’t tell what it is until you go somewhere else, or somebody says [something] to you.”¹³⁴

Most participants had noticeable difficulty articulating ways in which belly dancing fitted into this New Zealand culture when asked the question directly. While other questions frequently elicited immediate responses, almost all those interviewed in person or over the phone went silent while they thought about their responses to this particular question, even though many had already given, or subsequently gave, examples of belly dancing occurring in or being adapted specifically to New Zealand contexts. Several suggested belly dance could improve aspects of New Zealand culture – for example, by teaching women to “bring the[ir] femininity out”¹³⁵ through graceful movement and attention to appearance, or by offering something ‘different’. Others, drawing on memories of limited resources and recognising New Zealand belly dance’s comparative isolation from other belly dance communities, used popular tropes of “good old Kiwi DIY”¹³⁶ or “Kiwi ingenuity”¹³⁷ to express how belly dance developed a quality of New Zealandness for them. However, most participants viewed belly dancing as completely outside of New Zealand culture. For two first-generation New Zealand participants, this paralleled their personal sense of being outsiders.

I’m already other, kind of different. And for a long while, as a child I just wanted to be like everybody else, but eventually I gave up because I couldn’t do it, and doing something that was even more different [i.e. belly dancing] was a continuation of that.¹³⁸

Conversely, some Maori or Pasifika-identified interviewees saw (or sought) parallels between Maori and Middle Eastern cultural values, particularly surrounding family, hospitality and physical modesty. “The difference is we do *kapa haka* and they do belly dance,” PX observed. She also said Pacific Islanders had told her they thought there were similarities between belly dance and Pacific dance, especially Samoan dance, after watching her perform, in

¹³⁴ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007.

¹³⁵ IR, personal interview, 3rd December 2007.

¹³⁶ MV, personal interview, 1st November 2007.

¹³⁷ LU, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

¹³⁸ YH, personal interview, 5th November 2007.

terms of “the hand movements and ummis and the chest and things.”¹³⁹ However, the revealing costuming could jar with a typical emphasis on physical modesty in Pacific cultures.¹⁴⁰ PX said that for Maori women, too, “exposing your belly’s huge, especially after having children,” and felt this was the chief reason for less Maori and Pasifika involvement in belly dance classes.

SB believed Maori women were less likely to participate because they could access satisfying cultural activities, including participation in performance groups, through their *marae* or extended family, whereas non-Maori could not.

I don’t think Maori women are having quite such an identity crisis as Pakeha women are now. Pakeha women are saying, what makes me a New Zealander? ... What is culture? If culture is the language you speak, the clothes you wear, the activities you do, the songs you sing, the food you eat, the dances you dance – what makes a New Zealander from that aspect? I think we’re worried about that. We can’t just bowl off to a *marae* and say ‘can I join your *kapa haka* group?’... They don’t need or want Pakeha involved in those things.¹⁴¹

Many participants agreed that non-Maori/Pasifika New Zealanders lacked a dance culture of their own, and acknowledged this was a driving force behind their interest in belly dance. XG noted that New Zealanders generally only did “a little” social dancing in nightclubs, and usually only as young adults.

The minute you hit like 25 it’s all over, Rover. It doesn’t happen any more. You don’t have the old people, you don’t have the very young.¹⁴²

For SB, a woman dancing alone risked being considered sexually available, “mental” or stoned.

If a woman gets up [at a pub or club] and dances, we other girls are going, who does she think she is? Or ugh, she wants it. We don’t have [social dance] as any form of performance art here. We’re not used to looking at dance and valuing it.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ PX, personal interview, 19th December 2007.

¹⁴⁰ BB, a composer, who worked with Samoan dancers and an Australian belly dancer to create a hybrid dance piece for a show in 2007. Personal interview, March 2007.

¹⁴¹ SB, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹⁴² XG, personal interview, 20th November 2007.

¹⁴³ SB, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

EN observed that by comparison, performing for friends and family was quite acceptable in Maori contexts.

I used to think I was brought up pretty Pakeha, but looking back... my brother and I, if we had visitors we always got hauled up to perform, whether it be sing or dance, and that's so *pon'hiri*, you know.¹⁴⁴

However, the focus group participants detected a strong performative element in New Zealand social dancing, compared to their ideas of Middle Eastern social dance. Although HE unhappily echoed SB's observation that a dancing woman was often criticised even by friends for "attention-seeking," these participants believed media – particularly music videos from the United States – had devalued some of the sensual movements they enjoyed as belly dancers, and also made social dancing much less about "having fun" and more about being watched, and therefore, skilled.

When I was young, we had ...the whole disco thing, you know ...and the boys would be in that row and the girls would be in this row, and you had to do it all in time, sort of thing. And there's quite a lot of pressure involved (laughs) in knowing these dances. But still, everybody used to do it [regardless of skill level] [Middle Eastern women are] doing it to please themselves, and they're doing it because they enjoy it, whereas we in our culture ... do it to please other people, to show other people. They're boogying around and they're not really worrying about people watching them. Whereas all of this sexy stuff [now] ... is all about look at me, look at me, look at me.¹⁴⁵

Negotiating representation

Participants generally expressed awareness that they were negotiating a space between cultures when they belly danced, and demonstrated some ambivalence about this. They recognised problems of representation, but had deep personal investment in belly dancing as a method of self-expression and pleasurable display that they believed was not available, particularly for non-Maori-Pasifika women, within wider New Zealand culture. RA defined this ambivalence as feeling "like a stranger."

As a New Zealander trying to learn somebody else's culture and dance style, it makes me an outsider to that culture, and because I'm learning somebody else's culture it makes me an outsider to my own culture... Belly dance in general gives you more control over your own body, and therefore more control over your own person, but at

¹⁴⁴ EN, group interview, 21st December 2007.

¹⁴⁵ IF, focus group discussion, 1st June 2008.

the same time you have to balance that off with the fact that you're less accepted by others because of it.¹⁴⁶

For some dancers, this awareness resulted in careful negotiation between what they saw as culturally correct for Middle Eastern dance and the entertainment conventions of New Zealand contexts, with emphasis on the responsibilities attached to “presenting someone else’s culture”¹⁴⁷ and/or “promoting understanding ... of different cultures.”¹⁴⁸

You know, there’s a hell of a lot of responsibility there to one, do it properly, two do it so nobody gets hurt. You’ve got to do it so people enjoy it, and you’ve got to not misrepresent what you’re doing.¹⁴⁹

QZ handled this sense of responsibility through commitment to ‘authenticity’, which she interpreted as “doing it as closely as possible as they do it in the Middle East.”

If they want to change it then I’m happy to change too, but I think it needs to come from that matrix of the society and the language and the music. ...If something grows out of there then as far as I’m concerned it’s authentic.

CK emphasised the importance of “unfolding” the history and cultural roots of belly dancing. This kind of knowledge is seen as valuable, especially for dancers who are asked to stand in for Middle Eastern individuals, for example at cultural festivals.¹⁵⁰ Several participants spoke of their experiences of belly dancing at such events, articulating the ways this role could be both pleasurable and anxiety-provoking.

It’s just as if you’ve fed [the Middle Eastern audience] a happy pill... It brings a lot of joy... just seeing them happy, enjoying what we’re doing.¹⁵¹

It’s quite peculiar, because the other groups in these festivals, most of them come from that country or they’re married to someone from that country. Whereas... we’re Pakeha New Zealanders. The other people don’t seem to mind [but] it sort of worries me faintly because I feel we’re seriously not authentic... [T]hey say, what country are you

¹⁴⁶ RA, personal interview, 17th November 2007.

¹⁴⁷ QZ, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

¹⁴⁸ TC, personal interview, 30th October 2007.

¹⁴⁹ BL, personal interview, 29th November 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Groups generally field dancers or musicians from within their own social networks, as YH observes, but not Middle Eastern ones, probably because of the negative connotations of public dancing for women. Interestingly, in 2008, a group of male Saudi Arabian students danced during Christchurch’s Culture Galore festival, which may have been the first time Middle Eastern individuals danced to represent themselves at this event. It will be interesting to see what influence this has in future.

¹⁵¹ IR, personal interview, 3rd December 2007.

representing and I say ‘the Middle East’ and they say well, you have to be representing a country and I go ‘we’ll make it Egypt’.¹⁵²

Conscious hybridity

Attention to ‘authentic’ representation of indigenous belly dance was one strategy dancers employed to negotiate their concerns about representing cultures that were different to the one in which they grew up. An alternative approach was re-identifying their dance as ‘fusion’, a discursive strategy within globalised belly dance that allows dancers to explore hybridity openly. Fusion generally refers either to a direct, deliberate mixture of belly dancing with another dance style, or using belly dance moves to unconventional, usually Western, music. Participants in this study seemed comfortable also using the term to acknowledge that their regular belly dance was not ‘authentic’ Middle Eastern belly dance.

Being here means you can’t help but take something and slightly change it. You don’t even do it deliberately. So there are some changes that we do, and some that we haven’t even known that we’ve done.¹⁵³

The concept of fusion could also be used to position belly dance locally, as when dancers defined their dance as ‘Dunedin fusion’ or ‘Northland style.’

We take all the moves we’ve learned, and if it fits into the music, and we do it, it’s good...half the time I probably don’t know where the influences come from ... when I look at DVDs or when I buy books or go to workshops, we’re pretty much on track with what other people teach, which is quite good. But I can’t honestly say I’m teaching you *saidi* or I’m teaching *baladi* or I’m teaching American Cabaret or Egyptian or Turkish or Lebanese, because we kind of take moves from all of them.¹⁵⁴

[Due to the lack of Middle Eastern audiences] I’ve just felt a great freedom with it to make sure people have fun and not make sure that it’s correct or that it’s this style or that style. Because why shouldn’t it? It’s changed with the tides and the location.¹⁵⁵

Some participants also reported adapting Middle Eastern and globalised belly dance cultural practices, performing trance dance rituals when dancer friends were emotionally

¹⁵² YH, personal interview, 5th November 2007.

¹⁵³ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007.

¹⁵⁴ BL, personal interview, 29th November 2007.

¹⁵⁵ DM, personal interview, 11th November 2007.

distressed,¹⁵⁶ or using the celebratory *zaghareet* (ululation), generally used by non-indigenous belly dancers to express approval of a dance performance, as a method of announcing their location to friends in crowded places.¹⁵⁷

The focus group members spoke of fusing belly dance with ‘Western’ dance when they went to the pub, and were able to identify a wider process of hybridisation within ‘Western’ dance. In particular, they observed both that ‘Western’ social dance “lacked that sexy sensuousness” they enjoyed in Middle Eastern dance and “looked pretty bad” in comparison,¹⁵⁸ and that music videos from the United States had injected new styles into New Zealand social dancing, such as “the sexy stuff” and the energetic hip-hop style, krumping.¹⁵⁹ Their use of ‘Western dance’ to describe some movements they used socially, and saw others perform in nightclubs and bars, was interesting because the term is more often applied to formal or theatrical dance forms. This lack of distinction between formal and informal dance may have been informed by their understanding that indigenous belly dance has both social and performance applications. It was also striking that they appeared to default automatically to the broader binary notion of ‘Western’ (rather than ‘Kiwi’ or ‘New Zealand’) versus ‘Eastern’, to describe informal local dancing, suggesting that they, too, did not think of New Zealand as having its own dance. However, their observations that dancing had changed with the addition of music video-inspired movements, and that they were considered good dancers because they could add belly dance movements to their social repertoire, indicated they also perceived some dancing that, being neither of these things, might be deemed local.¹⁶⁰ Defaulting to a binary definition may also have helped them distinguish between belly dancing, which they liked, and other dancing that emphasised torso movement, which they liked less. This is consistent with the impetus towards codification and differentiation within globalised belly dance.

¹⁵⁶ Such practice is likely based on *zar*, a pre-Islamic dance-like ritual of possession which is used to treat many ailments, including emotional ones.

¹⁵⁷ DM, for example, recalled being sent a text message exhorting her to “make your sound” at a music festival to reveal her location.

¹⁵⁸ EB, focus group discussion, 1st June 2008.

¹⁵⁹ The dancer who mentioned her distaste for the “sexy” video-style dancing was one of the youngest participants in the focus group. Her keen awareness of such dancing may have reflected the younger age group with whom she socialised, although most of the older participants were the parents of teenagers or young adults, liked nightclubbing themselves, and were familiar with these new dance styles.

¹⁶⁰ During one interview a participant and I found that when introducing a sideways step with ‘touch’ of the unweighted foot to new students, we jokingly described it in terms of ‘the Kiwi dancing round the handbag dance.’ We both observed that students readily understand and do seem to recognise this as a common local way of dancing.

These participants demonstrated consciousness of New Zealand's participation, as part of 'the West,' in a wider global community, but also identified a simultaneous sense of being colonised by 'the West' via United States music videos. Some dancers resist this, as I elaborate below, through negotiation of some of the conventions of United States-based belly dance forms. Some dancers identified colonisation within belly dance as well. CW said she thought tribal belly dance was like "what Americans like to do to things like cheese," "pasteurised and homogenised" with "everything Arabic taken out of it". QZ attributed a favourite Egyptian teacher's newly formulaic approaches to the learning needs of 'Western' students. Others thought changes in belly dance reflected wider developments in a world where cultures and boundaries are increasingly less easy to define. NW's observation that she no longer felt "like a New Zealander doing a Middle Eastern dance so much any more," particularly in light of the North American infusion of a "jazz, funk-ed-up way of dancing" into belly dance, indicated that she saw herself as participating in a globalised, decentralised activity.

It was a really exotic thing to do 16 years ago, it was very unusual, and even teaching it was unusual. Now what I see has happened ... it's not just belly dance, it's like the matrix has fallen out of everything, and everything to do with art really, in the world. ... Music, costuming, everything's all minced up, and to be a New Zealander – well I just feel like I'm just part of the whole lack of matrix.¹⁶¹

Myths of transculturation, multiple cultures

Numerous participants in this study mentioned the 'gypsy trail' when talking about their constructions of belly dance. One participant noted that for her, belly dance fitted into New Zealand culture because New Zealanders "have a reputation for travelling, of being free, and of being cool people. Just like the gypsies."¹⁶² Another drew on gypsy fantasy both for costuming (full skirts and ruffled blouses, popular as a more modest option in some belly dance communities)¹⁶³ and when describing a particularly enjoyable performance, which took place under a marquee at a rural folk festival.

You're under canvas for a start, so therefore it was almost... that caravan, travelling setting, where you're sort of nomads and you're out there entertaining with 'the

¹⁶¹ NW, personal interview, 9th November 2007.

¹⁶² LU, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

¹⁶³ This participant also observed that people in her rural region seemed to like the more 'folky', gypsy-fantasy costuming and dance repertoire because of a sense of it being 'a country dance'.

people'.... and people were sitting round playing their instruments, and things, and it was just really nice.¹⁶⁴

For this dancer, the atmosphere provided by grass, haybales and a touchably-close, interactive audience was a welcome change from performing in “clinical” halls and “just felt right.” Dancing with a bush band also allowed the performers to adapt their folk-styled dancing to music strongly associated with New Zealand rural tradition. Thus, a fantasy of being historical gypsies aligned with sounds and images that conjured an idealised historical New Zealand. A different idealised past underlaid one dancer’s involvement in “lounge-style gigs” with a band that performed retro-style music, driven by “fading memories of New Zealand’s dine’n’dance culture,” at which audience members often wore their parents’ old gowns and suits.¹⁶⁵ The dancer said she felt the product was “probably more Kiwi than Middle Eastern ... sort of a hybrid,” and was comfortable with the result because it was unusual and not “tacky.”¹⁶⁶

Migration stories also create connections to Maori and Pacific cultures. The perceived similarity between belly dance and Pacific Island dance movements has led to speculation among some New Zealand belly dancers that they are related, based on a controversial diffusionist theory proposed in the 1970s.¹⁶⁷ The theory does not appear to be widely discussed, but one participant said she had shared elements of it in her teaching.

Concepts of transculturation achieved via Egyptian/ gypsy migration may thus be used to connect belly dance, not only to European traditions, but to Pacific ones as well, reassuring in a country where even indigenous people identify an immigrant past. However, pressure for New Zealand belly dancers to be culturally conscious in the face of growing multiculturalism and politically-sanctioned emphasis on indigenous self-determination,¹⁶⁸ combined with an increased impetus towards differentiation and/or authenticity within globalised belly dance, has

¹⁶⁴ VE, personal interview, 12th October 2007.

¹⁶⁵ MM, personal interview, 8th October 2007.

¹⁶⁶ JS, personal interview, 10th January 2008.

¹⁶⁷ New Zealand marine biologist and amateur epigrapher Barry Fell argued that rock paintings and carvings in the Pacific and North America indicated early Old World contact, including Egyptian migration into the Pacific. See, for example,

Fell, HB 1974, 'An Egyptian shipwreck at Pitcairn Island', *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications*, vol. 1. See also

Fell, HB 1976, *America BC: ancient settlers in the New World*, Quadrangle, New York.

¹⁶⁸ I refer here to the government-sanctioned model of New Zealand as bicultural and the emphasis, in discussions and decisions underpinned by the Treaty of Waitangi, on Maori rights to control Maori things. There are obviously powerful limits to how broadly or wholeheartedly indigenous rights are supported in reality.

undermined the gypsy trail myth to some degree. As IR explained, she was originally taught that belly dance was a hybrid, which meant that

if you look a little bit Indian or a little bit Arabic or a little bit Turkish, it doesn't really matter, because it's all combined in what we know as belly dance. But now, you have to know exactly [what style of dance you are doing].¹⁶⁹

She, like a number of the longer-term dancers interviewed, expressed nostalgia for a time when there was less “red tape” around the dance.

To me it was beautiful, to just say I'm a belly dancer. It was free and lovely and it had the spirit, the right spirit. The spirit of joy.¹⁷⁰

WF felt that the category of ‘fusion’ provided a “wide open arena” wherein dancers could explore new ideas without being labelled or judged; this freedom was unavailable, she believed, in modern dance and ballet. For this dancer, fusion occupies the same position as early modern dance, with its Orientalist themes, did a century ago; Yegenoglu (1998) might observe that the latent Orientalism infusing both these dance forms creates the fertile ground of fusion as a creative category. However, while having “free rein to play” was pleasurable,¹⁷¹ situations where New Zealand dancers were reported to have dressed as the Palestinian Liberation Front or worn chicken suits for a performance of Nubian dance¹⁷² demonstrated the pitfalls of having “no Middle Eastern people around being insulted and offended... If we go and try *kapa haka* [like that] we'll get growled out as quick as looked at.”¹⁷³ Participants were thus critical of breaching boundaries in ways that could offend others.

There were also indications that some participants identified ‘culture’ not solely as a nation or region’s shared values and customs, but as something that could be applied to other groups that shared certain characteristics. These participants were thus able to identify themselves as multicultural through specific practices. FP, for instance, referred to Catholicism as her “culture” and spoke about the wearing of rosary beads as jewellery as a form of

¹⁶⁹ IR, personal interview, 3rd December 2007.

¹⁷⁰ IR personal interview, 3rd December 2007.

¹⁷¹ SB, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹⁷² Nubian dances taught in New Zealand during the early 2000s include a series of steps nicknamed ‘chicken’ and ‘duck’. Two participants separately mentioned finding this particular performance distressingly insensitive.

¹⁷³ SB, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

“stealing” or cultural appropriation.¹⁷⁴ Participants also demonstrated selective fusion in their daily lives and physical environments. They negotiated, not necessarily consistently, actions that made certain cultures ‘their own’ while resisting appropriation. QZ felt it appropriate to have a ‘welcome’ sign at home in English, her parents’ native language, and Arabic (because of her passion for Middle Eastern dance and culture) but not Maori, because she felt that would be “pretentious.” “It’s not mine. It’s got its place here but it isn’t me.”¹⁷⁵ Thus, an acknowledgement of a positive and creative flow between cultures did not preclude a recognition of and desire for the maintenance of difference.

It appeared that while many dancers felt they should be sensitive to Middle Eastern and Maori culture, tribal belly dance could be appropriated and reworked less problematically. The impulse towards homogeneity and standardisation that some thinkers detect in globalisation not only creates parallel desire for what is different and local, but, as Kellner (2003: 39) argues of McDonald’s,¹⁷⁶ can also provide new methods of articulating a local identity. Within globalised belly dance, differentiation tends to centre around places of origin – Egyptian, Turkish – or style – tribal, oriental – rather than articulating a sense of one’s own place. CW’s critical observation that ATS reformulates belly dance into “a network marketing approach,” however, also reflects Kellner’s observation that McDonald’s both transmits forms of US-centric cultural imperialism and circulates novel and alternative forms that generate cultural hybridity in non-Western cultures (2003: 40). Globalised belly dance provides its digestible “experience of cultural otherness” to Western and other dancers outside indigenous belly dance cultures, whose tastes, preferences and uses of belly dance will also reflect the culture they live in. The “carefully constructed hybrid” package of tribal belly dance, readily accessible via websites, DVDs and certification programmes, perhaps bypasses ideas of appropriation in participants’ minds to some extent because it is always already an acknowledged fusion, and has become a consumer product to boot (Sellers-Young 2005: 291).¹⁷⁷ In the next section of this chapter, I present two case studies looking at approaches to belly dance that consciously operate within New Zealand setting – one a deliberate hybridisation resisting conventions, and the other an

¹⁷⁴ FP, group interview, 21 December 2007.

¹⁷⁵ QZ, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

¹⁷⁶ Kellner is here critiquing George Ritzer’s dystopian presentation of McDonaldisation as ultimately another version of Weber’s “iron cage” of rationalisation.

¹⁷⁷ All belly dance is a consumer product in a globalised setting, but ATS is literally a brand. Dancers can buy official Fat Chance Belly Dance merchandise and be certified as ATS instructors.

exploration and negotiation of globalised belly dance cultural norms around representing indigenous belly dance.

Kiwi Iwi – a new tribe

Several participants in this study spoke positively of Christchurch tribal troupe Kiwi Iwi, saying they enjoyed the troupe's fusion of Middle Eastern and Pacific elements, costuming, and uniqueness.¹⁷⁸ Kiwi Iwi – the name itself a reworking of “American Tribal” (American = Kiwi, Tribe = *iwi*) – was created explicitly to explore tribal-style belly dance while actively resisting the label ‘American.’ The participants also wanted to be “more of our place. More of New Zealand.”¹⁷⁹

CC, who founded the troupe, says she found ATS exciting and new “with lots of potential,” but felt that viewing the dance through “the cultural eyes” of a New Zealander rather than a North American required “another cultural shift” to restore “a missing factor.” Other early members recall disliking “what seemed... starting out to be an enormous number of rules” in ATS.¹⁸⁰ CC was particularly uncomfortable with several aspects. These were the “mashing” of costume pieces from different cultures, the ATS system of naming moves – “things called the Basic Egyptian, when I felt in my study of Middle Eastern dance that the movement was actually much more Turkish... it was like calling something the Irish” – and “the highly repetitive nature and... physical one-sidedness” of some of the movements.

I went... right! If we're going to have a cultural mash, I'll give it a hell of a cultural mash! We're Kiwis, and the most Kiwi thing we can possibly do here is take [out] some of ... these influences that to me weren't working and put some of our own stuff [*kapa haka*] into it.¹⁸¹

While the troupe has become more overtly ‘tribal’ in its presentation since CC's departure and since gaining greater experience and skill in tribal style belly dance, and has extended its focus to ‘Oceania’, thus creating scope for a wider movement vocabulary,¹⁸² it retains the elements members initially defined as ‘Kiwi,’ which relate to music, costuming, props

¹⁷⁸ Tribal fusion is commonplace in globalised belly dance circles today, but when Kiwi Iwi first appeared, their work was considered quite radical by other New Zealand tribal dancers.

¹⁷⁹ FP, group interview, 21st December 2007.

¹⁸⁰ FP, group interview, 21st December 2007.

¹⁸¹ CC, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹⁸² The dancers identified, for example, a floor pose taken from Rarotongan dance.

and movement vocabulary. *Poi*¹⁸³ was introduced as an “Aotearoan prop”¹⁸⁴ alongside the more commonplace sword and *zills*, along with movements either directly borrowed from *kapa haka* (such as *wiri*¹⁸⁵) or inspired by them. The latter include a modified tribal movement (pivot-bump): the vertical hip lift is replaced with a horizontal slide, recalling the side-to-side stepping used in *kapa haka* to make female performers’ *piupiu*¹⁸⁶ swing. Contemporary Maori music is used along with more traditional tribal and alternative pieces; the piece ‘Tahi’ includes a choreographed *haka*.

Costuming initially retained an ATS base, with dancers in Indian *choli* tops, full pantaloons and tasselled hip belts, but in colours they associated with New Zealand – “purples, blues and greens” - rather than the typical reds and blacks of ATS.¹⁸⁷ Hand-felted wool was chosen for the belts because of the fabric’s ubiquity and familiarity in New Zealand. “And it’s very Pakeha. The sheep is an introduced animal.”¹⁸⁸ Other modifications included the adoption of paua-shell jewellery in place of imported Afghani pieces¹⁸⁹ and loose hair instead of turbans.¹⁹⁰ FP observed that Kiwi Iwi would have eschewed shoes even if it were conventional for tribal dancers to wear them, because bare feet were “just so New Zealand as well.” The troupe also adopted a fantasy version of the *kowhai moko*¹⁹¹ in place of the artificial Berber tattoos conventionally worn by ATS dancers. (Fig. 8)

It seemed very strange here in this land to be using Berber tattoos when we’re living with a culture that has facial tattoos. So again, we took that and took it with a fantasy twist – we didn’t try to replicate traditional designs.¹⁹²

¹⁸³ I, along with some Kiwi Iwi members, was initially surprised and somewhat disappointed to discover that some tribal performers in Australia and North America also incorporated poi, not realising that poi was used indigenously in other parts of the Pacific. However, the Kiwi Iwi members interviewed said that their usage of wrap poi with belly dance was, as far as they knew, unique to them. They were also interested in developing further use of short poi.

¹⁸⁴ CC, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹⁸⁵ Quivering of the hands, used in haka. A similar movement is present in some North African and Gulf dance.

¹⁸⁶ Flax skirts.

¹⁸⁷ FP, group interview, 21st December 2007..

¹⁸⁸ CC, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹⁸⁹ Dunedin’s The Lost Tribe, who are more traditionally ATS in their presentation, have also adopted paua, and have incorporated old New Zealand coins, such as ‘thrupenny bits,’ in their costuming.

¹⁹⁰ Many tribal dancers elsewhere have also abandoned turbans, in favour of hair adornments and real or fake dreadlocks, particularly in the ‘urban tribal’ movement, but Kiwi Iwi’s lack of turbans was unusual in New Zealand at the time the troupe was founded.

¹⁹¹ Traditional Maori women’s chin tattoo.

¹⁹² CC, personal interview, 21st January 2008. Current members were very specific about their designs being “swirly patterns on our chins” and not *moko*, though they would refer to them as *moko* in passing during the interview.

The members who were interviewed expressed some ambivalence about both the incorporation of *kapa haka* and their chin tattoo designs, particularly those of non-Maori ancestry, although two members – one Maori and one with strong Pakeha identification – both said they felt “strong” when wearing their “*moko*”, and when performing the troupe’s *haka* during “Tahi.” “Do it when you’re angry and it’s the best thing.”¹⁹³ They were, however, always conscious of issues of cultural appropriation.

I know for myself if somebody’s appropriated my culture, which I have had an experience of... all I could think was... how dare you, how dare you steal my culture. And I didn’t tell her. And I have to think that we could be offending people every time we perform and they’re just not telling us.¹⁹⁴

However, they were confident about their research, which involved reading books and liaison with local Maori groups, including pan-tribal ones,¹⁹⁵ and agreed that involvement in Kiwi Iwi had encouraged members with little prior understanding of Maori culture to study it further. The member with Maori ancestry said she felt personally “strengthened” by the use of *kapa haka* movements and music with Maori lyrics, and loved “having to” listen to contemporary Maori music to find suitable pieces for new Kiwi Iwi dances.¹⁹⁶ Involvement in the troupe had also given her a love of *poi*, at which she was now extremely adept. However, she was conscious that her own *inwi* was comfortable with women performing *haka* or *taiaha*, but that if she were living in another region she would be “checking, really carefully, and put[ting] up with conversations that last six months, you know.”

CC had “heaps of qualms” about incorporating elements of Maori culture alongside tribal belly dance, but said it did not feel strange because she felt confident she could do so with the same integrity she tried to apply to oriental dance. She observed that it was harder to produce a quality oriental dance show because of the comparative difficulty of accessing deeper Middle Eastern cultural knowledge.

It’s very, very hard to study a culture from the outside in, and to get any understanding of it... The songs are sung in Arabic. It’s easier to get an interpretation of the lyrics if the lyrics are sung in Maori. There are a lot of people I could get interpretations from. I

¹⁹³ HO, group interview, 21 December 2007.

¹⁹⁴ FP, group interview, 21st December 2007.

¹⁹⁵ CC, personal interview, 21st January 2008.

¹⁹⁶ EN, group interview, 21 December 2007.

could get two or three and compare them, for example, and come up with appropriate gestures to those words. And then the [Arabic] gestures are quite different.

Kiwi Iwi thus offered her a sense of greater creative agency, due to her study of both belly dance and *kapa haka*. She did not mention a third element, namely her understanding of the New Zealand cultural conventions with which she had grown up, probably because it seemed unremarkable. This was vital, however, because like the other members of Kiwi Iwi, she could draw on, challenge, and play with the norms of her own culture with considerably more facility than she could one that was only partly understood.

Embodying cultural alterity: a case study

The achievement of culturally ‘authentic’ performance is highly prized among globalised belly dancers who prefer indigenous-styled belly dance, as demonstrated by the popularity of study with indigenous teachers and classes teaching region-specific styles and culturally-specific concepts related to music and dance, such as *tarab*.¹⁹⁷ Meyda Yegenoglu (1998: 121) asserts that the notion of authenticity is a product of Orientalist hegemony, since it centres around constructing difference between the native and the Westerner. Aiming for authenticity, then, still caters to a desire for the “true and authentic” native voice, which for Yegenoglu “is the very gesture by which the sovereign Western subject constructs himself/herself as considerate and benevolent” (ibid). However, producing such representations is in truth a hybrid sort of work, though not as obviously hybrid as the deliberate fusions practiced by groups like Kiwi Iwi. These dances cannot be ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ representations of indigenous dance because they are being performed outside their place (and sometimes time) of origin, by culturally-other dancers. Their cultural otherness includes their approach to music, which may mark the crucial difference between indigenous and non-indigenous belly dancers.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, they more accurately represent an intersection between indigenous belly dance and the accepted standards

¹⁹⁷ *Tarab* refers to a kind of urban, secular music which evokes an emotionally ecstatic state in listeners. A dancer performing to *tarab* music aims to embody the listener’s emotional response, which in Arabic cultures would be informed by prior knowledge of the song, particularly its lyrics (which may be absent in performance.) See:

Racy, AJ 2003, *Making Music in the Arab World: the culture and artistry of tarab*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

¹⁹⁸ Middle Eastern individuals will often observe that non-indigenous dancers may be technically excellent but lack the embodied musicality of those who have listened and danced to Arabic music all their lives. It has been described to me as the difference between selecting movements to suit the music, and “the music dancing you” – moving almost unconsciously in response to the musical sounds.

of globalised belly dance. Like deliberate fusion, such work also requires conscious engagement across cultural conventions.

In mid-2008, I researched, choreographed and performed a *baladi*-styled *melaya leff* dance in a show aimed at the general public, at which other belly dancers were present. My process in creating this dance reflected multiple positions: New Zealander, belly dancer, and critically-aware researcher conscious of transculturation and the inevitably “contaminated” terrain on which the dance would be created (Bhabha 1996: 58). I negotiated my desire to present the dance in a way that conformed to expectations of ‘authentic’ *melaya leff*, which would impress my fellow belly dancers, against my rejection of cultural authenticity and concerns about the political implications of deliberately performing as a cultural other.

Like Laura Osweiler (2005) in her explorations of experimental belly dance, I knew that this ‘traditional’ dance’s ‘authenticity’ was highly constructed, and would gain even more layers as I worked with it. *Melaya leff*, which originates in Egyptian folkloric theatre dance, is challenging because, in addition to its unfamiliar costuming and presentation, it requires the performer to embody a particular Egyptian cultural type, the urbanised *bint al balad*, or country (*baladi*)¹⁹⁹ girl, who is stereotyped in Egypt as earthy, bawdy and sexually uninhibited (Lorius 1996: 289). Unlike the generic, undifferentiated ‘Other’ represented in Orientalist dance and, arguably, most Oriental or tribal belly dance, the other of *melaya leff* performance is not a Western fantasy, but a mid-20th century, upper-class, Cairene Egyptian one. The original dance was one of the “sanitised”, class-conscious, colonised folkloric dances Anthony Shay (2002: 136-137) and Stavros Stavrou Karayanni (2004: 172) criticise, but has become more overtly flirtatious in the hands of some Egyptian dancers, presumably because the character is *baladi*. In globalised belly dance circles, *baladi* characterisation and a quality of flirty, self-aware sexiness (*dela*) are more important than complex dance technique when presenting *melaya leff*. Thus, there are multiple levels of representation present in a *melaya leff* dance.

The dance centres on the wrapping and unwrapping of a large black modesty wrap (*melaya*); this action lets the dancer show off her figure while remaining fully clothed in street

¹⁹⁹ When referring to a social class, *baladi* denotes working-class people with a rural background, often those living in slum areas. The term implies values such as authenticity, honour, pride and hospitality, and is generally set against *afrangi*, a privileged, westernised social class that may be positioned as contrastingly amoral and insincere. See:

Early, EA 1993, *Baladi women of Cairo: playing with an egg and a stone*, I. Riener, Boulder.

wear, thus undermining the *melaya*'s official role of concealment. I was attracted by this rejection of the 'sensual, not sexual' edict of globalised belly dance culture; *melaya leff*'s combination of wilful provocation and covered flesh appears to offer greater agency for deliberate sexual display than more traditional belly dance.²⁰⁰ I also wanted to succeed at presenting 'traditional' *melaya leff*. However, I was conscious of the Orientalist implications of the *bint al balad* persona - the adoption of which was key to the performance. To do it risked ethnic parody, the appropriative mimicry of 'brownface.' It thus became apparent that this project would require constant negotiation around presenting a performative self that was at once representative of an 'Egyptian' Other and of 'me,' which could never be entirely unproblematic.

Through my research I inferred that many globalised belly dancers treated *melaya leff* as an opportunity to poke fun at a 'low-class' character with costuming that is gaudy to the point of being grotesque. I was uncomfortable with the quality of mocking another person's culture that I detected in such interpretations. The first *melaya leff* performances I had seen were by New Zealanders, costumed conservatively and attractively in simple dresses, street shoes and unbound hair similar to their own favourite outfits. I wanted to try more traditional costuming, to demonstrate that I understood the conventions, but without sacrificing my own aesthetic and ethical preferences. I dispensed with the most challenging costume item, the open-weave face veil (*bur'a*), because I felt the audience would find it ugly and intimidating, but retained the pompom-decorated headscarf (*mandeel*), which also allowed me to cover my uncharacteristic short hair, and a dress that evoked the ruffled dress usually associated with the style (Fig. 9). The piece also required movements deemed *baladi* in globalised belly dance circles, which meant I had to adopt larger, simpler and more momentum-driven movements than in my preferred, Oriental dance style. I found I had to negotiate with myself a selection of movements that were suitable, but that I felt remained physically attractive on my body.

Understanding, or appearing to understand, the lyrics of a song is seen as crucial to present Egyptian dance successfully within globalised belly dance culture. The music for this piece – "Ala Warag Il Foul" (With the Leaf of a Carnation He Spoiled Me) – was selected primarily for its appropriate style and because I had found a translation and transliteration of the lyrics online. Transliterations allow a dancer to 'find' the meaning of specific sections of lyrics by reading, listening and extrapolating, though this can still be risky. For instance, it

quickly became apparent that my version's lyrics were not identical to the transliteration. Thus, some initial choreographic ideas related to the lyrics had to be dispensed with for fear of making a mistake. Repeated listening to the music with transliteration in hand, along with my knowledge of a few Arabic words,²⁰¹ allowed me to sing along with some confidence in parts, which an Egyptian audience member later told me he appreciated. Nonetheless, I was acutely conscious that I did not, in truth, understand the song.

Audience responses appeared profoundly coloured by their prior experiences of belly dance. To my surprise, a non-belly dancing audience member interpreted the dance as a Western interpretation of belly dance, because it was performed in a day dress. Two senior New Zealand dancers who specialise in *baladi* style received it well, because of my successful negotiation of the conventions of the style as they understood them. The Egyptian viewer received it well because of my apparent understanding of a familiar song.²⁰² The performance thus succeeded, even though it was (understandably) not recognisable as Egyptian to an unschooled viewer. However, I could not enjoy it as “a space for difference and otherness” in the same way I might have if I performed it in jeans, or drawn upon a New Zealand ‘type’ instead of an Egyptian one, which might have allowed me to circumvent the issue of ethnic parody while retaining a line back into tradition (Oswelier 2005). Having successfully presented the ‘traditional’ version, I now felt more comfortable about trying such an interpretation in future. I would probably, however, have to describe it as ‘fusion’ to ensure audiences did not think I was performing ‘authentic’ Egyptian folkloric dance. This could still be perceived as a rejection of traditional styles and a form of cultural appropriation.

Future directions

Globally, tribal belly dance has become strongly associated with fusion, to the extent that any unconventional belly dance is often labelled as, or assumed to be, ‘tribal fusion’ even if it is not.²⁰³ Tribal was initially sometimes positioned as a feminist or resistant alternative to ‘cabaret’ or oriental belly dance due to its less revealing costuming, ‘earthiness’ and, in ATS,

²⁰¹ I do not speak Arabic but like many non-indigenous belly dancers can recognise a number of words and phrases, which have often been taught to me in workshops.

²⁰² I was also conscious he might simply have been happy to hear a familiar song,

²⁰³ For example, at Oasis Dance Camp, a United States participant presented a ‘tribal fusion’ dance to a rock song which showed no evidence to my eye of any tribal movements at all.

emphasis on the projection of unified feminine strength rather than an audience-directed performance of heteronormative femininity (see, for example, Zussman 1995). As ATS has become mainstream, the term ‘tribal’ has retained implications of resistance; new ‘fusion’ offshoots of tribal resist both ‘traditional’ belly dance and ATS, but intersect with them. This has interesting implications when examined in terms of Osweiler’s (2005) Deleuzian framework. For Osweiler, “traditional Middle Eastern dance” (by which she means American belly dance emulating indigenous styles) seeks to retain its difference and uniqueness by constructing a binary between itself and “experimental” belly dance, whereas the experimental variants disrupt this binary by constructing lines back into traditional forms. However, as the category ‘tribal’ splinters against the increasing “sedimentation” of ATS into a strictly codified style that, like Osweiler’s traditionalists, works to maintain a unique and separate identity by adopting tropes of authenticity and purity,²⁰⁴ it is clear that tribal dancers, too, may come to create binaries that “hide and at times deny” a mixture of influences.

I propose that it is not only in experimental or resistant variants of belly dance that the binary process is deliberately disrupted. As numerous New Zealand dancers involved in this study explained, their recognition that they were not ‘authentic’ allowed them a sense of agency over the conventions of the dance. By dubbing even dances with a traditional look ‘fusion,’ they circumvent issues of appropriation and reclaim the sense of creative self-expression that some suggested had been lost in the face of growing ‘political correctness.’

Participants’ responses suggested that a more complex understanding of cultural hybridity and recognition of their involvement in a globalised activity results in the production of more nuanced strategies for making belly dance personally relevant. Where belly dance was previously constructed as already hybrid by the gypsy trail myth, more intensive globalisation has led to a desire for differentiation between styles and a perhaps reactive push for ‘authenticity.’ Dancers may use ‘fusion’ as a method of justifying the ongoing process of hybridisation they recognise in their personal dance styles, which allows them to bypass accusations of inauthenticity. Dancers who embraced fusion nonetheless seemed to consider belly dance kinaesthetically (or culturally) distinct from other dances, exhibiting concerns at

²⁰⁴ ATS is an acknowledged “modern style of dance” which differentiates itself from “classical styles ... [or] a traditional version”. Creator Carolena Nericcio’s reported insistence that “ATS” is used only to refer to her style and that her certified teachers must not teach other belly dance styles, along with her adoption of the term “Tribal: Pura” to describe “an absolute style” based on classical art and scientific guidelines, help keep ATS separate from subsequent developments. See: www.fcdb.com

times that the dance could hybridise to a point where it ceased to be belly dance. “There’s lots of questions there - when is fusion not belly dance - and those are questions I ask [of myself] all the time.”²⁰⁵ The participants who mentioned incorporating belly dance into dancing in social contexts other than belly dance performances indicated that long-term practice gave them a sense of entitlement to belly dance movements that was also informed by their participation in globalised belly dance culture, where such dancing was ‘normal’ behaviour. Use of belly dance movements in this way was therefore not constructed as representing the exotic, but as natural for them and personally authentic.

When it was discussed in interviews and focus groups, Maori culture, like Middle Eastern culture, was usually seen as ‘Other’ by non-Maori participants, and equally difficult to engage with, though not completely inaccessible or incomprehensible to those who researched carefully. This parallels the globalised belly dancer’s emphasis on researching, studying and codifying the dance and its indigenous cultural contexts, or stylistic nuances, in order to ‘master’ it before engaging in fusion practices, as I demonstrate in my *melaya leff* process. However, none of the non-Maori participants seemed confident of ever claiming ownership over things deemed Maori, being conscious they might be inadvertently offensive or ‘getting it wrong’ despite their best efforts, or even excluded on the basis of not being Maori. Several responses indicated that participants somewhat envied the perceived high value of music and performance in both Maori and Middle Eastern cultures, compared to mainstream New Zealand culture.

There was a small degree of resentment towards ‘political correctness’, but most participants indicated a desire to remain always in a process of learning and engaging with any ‘others’ whose culture contained elements they found desirable or attractive, in order not to offend or unthinkingly appropriate. I propose this cautious approach reflects both socio-political developments towards biculturalism in New Zealand since the 1970s and the growing visibility of migrants from countries where belly dance is an indigenous practice. However, a number of participants, including some who seemed particularly influenced by the gypsy trail model, seemed less concerned about getting belly dance ‘wrong.’ The notion of creative appropriation via fusion was perhaps easier to apply to belly dance because participants saw it as completely external to New Zealand culture, whereas Maori were always already in New

²⁰⁵ WF, personal interview, 14th December 2007.

Zealand and had acknowledged expertise about their own cultural conventions and activities. The United States origins of many influential teachers, troupes and learning materials also reinforces many participants' recognition of globalised belly dance's hybridity, compared to representations of Maori culture in New Zealand media that emphasise the value of strict adherence to traditional protocols with little room for flexibility. Thus, it appeared that some indigenous cultures were more 'off-limits' than others, and appropriation closer to home was seen as more problematic because of the higher likelihood of being "growled out."²⁰⁶

The Kiwi Iwi participants' references to landscape – one modelled her belt after a favourite childhood haunt - loose hair, barefootedness and natural resources like shells and sheep indicate that their constructions of 'Kiwiness' were perhaps no less located in a mythic or idealised past than the Silk Road fantasy of classic ATS. However, their development of new costuming, drawing simultaneously on contemporary international tribal trends (long fringed overskirts, which also evoke the *pinpin*, cowrie shells), and "retro" Kiwiana (shell-encrusted bras, red, black and white *kowhaimbai*-patterned ribbon) (Fig. 10), and the incorporation of, for example, a Latin-flavoured dance reflecting one member's Mexican nationality, suggests the construction via pastiche of a more globalised and fluid Kiwi identity. While the Kiwi Iwi model presents an idealised reinterpretation of a liberal, happy, homogenous New Zealand where Maori, Pakeha and migrants are 'one people', it does so by acknowledging difference and creating a space wherein cultures flow together without fully merging.

The participants expressed recognition that wider concerns, such as cultural appropriation and the representation of others, permeated their involvement in belly dancing, which they largely seemed to identify as fragmented, fluid, transcultural and complex rather than static, though they sometimes remained worried about 'authenticity'. In the concluding chapter to this thesis, I return to the concerns with which this research began. I will summarise the ways that these participants' remarks and activities challenge binary models of Eastern/Western, authentic/fusion, self/Other in belly dancing practice, and indicate a more complex level of engagement than simply playing out fantasies of alterity.

²⁰⁶SB, personal interview, 21st January 2008

CHAPTER SIX

“Like the matrix has fallen out of everything.”²⁰⁷

conclusions and possibilities

Where belly dancers once attempted to find an ‘authentic’ Oriental dance by reaching back into imagined precolonial (and prepatriarchal) antiquity, contemporary New Zealand dancers like QZ and BL, with their emphasis on “do[ing] it properly”²⁰⁸ “from that matrix of [Middle Eastern] society and the language and the music”²⁰⁹ are unsurprised to encounter a colonial hybrid. Although some participants in this study did criticise ‘Westernisation’ in both indigenous and globalised belly dance, they did not seem so strongly impelled to extricate an ‘authentic’ dance from one colonised by Western nations or a suppressive patriarchy. Their vastly increased access to and use of diverse materials, fuelled by globalised belly dance culture’s endorsement of research as a way to differentiate between styles and understand cultural conventions, suggests a possibility for such dancers to view even indigenous belly dance as a contemporary hybrid, albeit rooted in Middle Eastern and North African cultural contexts.²¹⁰ It is harder for New Zealand women today to fantasise about an exotic, undifferentiated Orient, when real Middle Eastern men and women live and work beside them, Middle Eastern food items line their supermarket shelves, and a quick glance at YouTube can show them the latest costumes from Cairo and social belly dance in jeans.

This thesis contributes to the still-small field of scholarly writing about belly dancing, and problematises the “Middle Eastern/Western” binary around which it has largely centred, by proposing a globalised model instead. The New Zealand belly dance community, while strongly influenced by United States dancers, approaches and beliefs, operates in different contexts to

²⁰⁷ NW, personal interview, 9th November 2007.

²⁰⁸ BL, personal interview, 29th November 2007.

²⁰⁹ QZ, personal interview, 28th September 2007.

²¹⁰ One of these interviewees, for instance, owns Shay’s *Choreographic Politics*, and, as I implied in the preamble to this thesis, I have seen some of the same academic books about belly dancing that I have drawn upon recommended on belly dance discussion websites.

those of the United States. My experiences of learning to belly dance in New Zealand, along with my observation-from-a-distance (via books and media) of the ways belly dance plays out in both the United States and parts of the Middle East, made me conscious of how strongly United States-centric many articles and resources prove to be. Considering a broader field that recognises that belly dancing takes place in many countries that are not only not part of North America, but not ‘Western’ either, allows for a more nuanced critical exploration that does not reduce belly dancing to a simple binary model.

In proposing that belly dancing in the 21st century should more properly be thought of as a global activity, I have nonetheless distinguished between belly dancing that takes places in contexts where it is culturally normative – indigenous belly dancing – and belly dancing in other contexts – globalised belly dancing. Rather than being a Western reinterpretation of Middle Eastern and North African dances, as Barbara Sellers-Young (1992) and Julie Fisher (2003) suggest, globalised belly dance is best considered as the expression of a synthetic culture which centres on the act of belly dancing. Like other cultures, it has its own traditions, such as the adoption of ‘exotic’ new names for public performance and the creation of safe spaces, like haflas, for students of belly dance to perform. It has shared mythologies, such as beliefs about the dance having ties to childbirth and fertility and being disseminated by gypsies. Cultural capital might include specialist knowledge of a particular style. It is transcultural; although globalised belly dance is dominated by United States-led approaches to the dance, there is significant, growing input from specialist teachers, costumers, musicians and performers from countries where the dance is an indigenous practice, and from other countries where it is practiced.²¹¹ The local conventions of places where it is practiced also play a part. The institutionalisation of belly dancing via formal classes and performances provides participants with a ‘package deal,’ which provides not only access to a dance style and a ‘taste’ of an exotic culture, but also increased body confidence, friends, and opportunities to dress up and perform as if professional. This ‘McDonaldised’ “cultural pedagogy” is experienced and used in multiple and diverse ways; it is imposed on the practice of belly dancing, but also provides both indigenous and non-indigenous participants with a structure they can adapt for their own purposes, as when Egyptian teachers create festivals for non-indigenous participants (Kellner 2003: 39).

²¹¹ For instance, Australian tribal belly dancers Devi Mamak of Ghawazee Caravan and Melusina of Underbelly, whose idiosyncratic approaches to tribal make them in demand as teachers not only in Australia but increasingly, internationally.

The responses of participants in this research demonstrated that involvement with belly dancing is more complicated than exploring ideas about the self/Other through the enactment of Orientalist fantasies, although Orientalist fantasy undeniably underpins some of the practices of globalised belly dance, and the idea of self-consciously adopting an 'exotic' persona certainly appeals to some dancers more than others. In particular, dancers' relationship with belly dancing, and activities associated with it, may change over time, as they gain facility with the dance form and it ceases to feel new and unfamiliar in their bodies. Dancers who participated in this study confirmed that their enjoyment of belly dance was not solely about performing alterity, or a purely sensual experience, or a method of becoming involved in a feminine community, but as a combination of some or all of these factors. The harem discourse Donnalee Dox (2006: 55) identifies seems to have taken on a latent aspect that both supports and resists contemporary discourses around care of the self; dancers use belly dance both as a route to physical fitness and as an opportunity to resist mainstream models of the fit body. Some participants indicated their pleasure in the dance came not from performing alterity but from learning to move in a way that felt good to them and looked good to others. Moreover, through long-term involvement with belly dance, a participant may cease to think of the dance and its conventions as 'other' because it becomes a normal thing for her to do. Thus, while the appearance of her dancing body might reinforce fantasies of otherness in viewers, her experience of the dance may begin to erode them in herself. These experiences of the dance becoming 'natural,' or habitual, almost certainly fuel some dancers' ideas about women bonding across cultures via a sort of universal female movement system, or of belly dancing generating greater intercultural recognition and understanding.

Fantasies about liberated gypsies actively creating a hybrid culture, while they risk being just as Orientalist and appropriative as old fantasies about a veiled, exotic Orient, do seem to acknowledge a problem with ideas about authenticity and purity, and may be more useful for participants in belly dance living in a globalised world. The gypsy trail model retains its line back into the old desire for historical validation via an unchanging Orient, but acknowledges and validates hybridity rather than a singular authenticity. Most of the New Zealand dancers expressed recognition of their own involvement in the dance's ongoing hybridisation. In place of the older view of the dance as "a little bit Indian ...a little bit Arabic... a little bit Turkish... all combined in what we know as belly dance,"²¹² which positioned fluidity as 'authentic,' the

²¹² IR, personal interview, 3rd December 2007.

concept of ‘fusion’ allowed some participants to work around the new firming-up of categories in globalised belly dance. This gave them personal agency while implicitly deferring to those who could supply ‘authenticity’ either through focused study of one particular style, or by having learned the dance indigenously.

Identifying their dance practice as fusion also seemed to be a conscious response by some dancers to concerns about misrepresenting ‘other’ cultures. It is probable that the specific cultural contexts in which 21st century NZ belly dance finds itself - specifically, a culture in which issues around biculturalism, colonialism, cultural appropriation and ownership, and nascent multiculturalism, are regularly debated – contribute to this self-awareness to some degree. The New Zealand dancers involved in this research seldom indicated that they were consciously invested in fantasies about exotic Middle Eastern Others. Almost all participants demonstrated knowledge of the dance’s ambiguous status as both a social/domestic practice in Middle Eastern cultures, and recognised that it continued to develop there. That is, most did not seem to think of belly dance as a historical artefact rescued, recirculated or even created (as Julie Fisher (2003) argues) by North Americans. Nor, as Stavros Stavrou Karayanni (2004: 161) observes of the North American belly dance community, did they appear to “assume the hegemonic role of emissaries who perpetuate, embellish and safeguard [belly dance’s] survival” in the face of a Middle Eastern failure to embrace the dance as art.

The insights that arise in this thesis reflect and demonstrate the value of an insider-outsider status for research of this kind. Because I am a New Zealand belly dancer, I not only had access to a network of dancers in a variety of locations who practiced different styles of belly dancing but was also better able to contextualise dancers’ statements, in light of my own knowledge of belly dancing, than a researcher without this background could have done. As a non-indigenous belly dancer outside North America, I also had a different kind of insider-outsider status when it came to critical appraisal of the literature. Some academic articles about non-indigenous belly dancing frustrated me, because I recognised variables that the writers, who were obviously not belly dancers, did not, and their conclusions thus seemed under-informed. Conversely, most of the key writers about belly dance are belly dancers themselves, and can similarly contextualise local performances and practices, but they are nearly all North American and thus deeply embedded in ideas about ‘Western’ belly dance that centre on the unique circumstances that gave rise to American Cabaret in the 1960s and American Tribal Style in the 1990s. I was thus able to use my different viewpoint to draw new conclusions.

This thesis also demonstrates the value of looking at things in what Douglas Kellner (2003: 45) calls a “multiperspectivist” way. To understand belly dancing outside its indigenous contexts more fully, we need to consider not only what belly dancers might represent, but also the bodily pleasures they experience and the socio-historical contexts in which they experience them. The role of Orientalism in constructing Middle Eastern women as emblematic Others, and belly dancers as particularly representative of a revealed, eroticised Middle Eastern Other, must never be discounted. But to analyse non-indigenous belly dancing in a really meaningful and rich way, it is necessary also to contextualise it within its own synthetic culture as well as the wider cultures where it occurs, along with a consideration both of large issues like global politics and consumerism, and the ways participants experience the dance physically and emotionally.

One of the goals of this research has been to demonstrate something that is, in retrospect, rather self-evident: belly dancers are not homogenous, and they become involved in and enjoy the dance form in multiple and diverse ways. Further analysis of belly dancing, a Middle Eastern mode of entertainment and personal expression that has been reterritorialised in a variety of ways by people, mostly women, in a variety of cultures, may provide new insights into the processes of globalisation and transculturation. It would be particularly valuable to examine the popularity of belly dancing in Asian countries like Japan, China and Korea, where constructions of alterity will be different and where the Orientalist binary construction, as North Americans, New Zealanders and Middle Easterners understand it, may not even be present. I am also conscious that, despite my attempts to avoid a binary model, talking about indigenous and globalised belly dance still implies only two worlds of belly dance. This research has not considered diasporic belly dance, for example. An examination of what role belly dancing might play for people of Middle Eastern heritage, either newly emigrated or in established diasporic communities, in the construction (or maintenance) of a distinct ethnic identity would be valuable.

Analysis of dancers’ talk about the physical sensations of belly dancing and the ways they experience learning the dance presents possibilities for deeper exploration of the acquisition of bodily habitus. Belly dancing may be particularly good for this because many non-indigenous participants begin learning as adults, sometimes with little to no prior dance experience, and can talk about their experiences of unfamiliar body movements becoming familiar. This research demonstrated that dancers reported a strong focus on feeling the

movement in the body while learning, but their consciousness turned to how the movement looked once some skill was achieved. Thus, much as Pirkko Markula's (2006) attempts to present feminist research through contemporary dance seemed disrupted by the preconceptions contained in both her own and her audience's gaze, their embodied experience of the dance seemed almost always related back, eventually, to the looks of the body. However, their insistence that belly dance movements performed well could render ordinary bodies extraordinary in the eyes of others demonstrated a belief that belly dance had capacity to challenge conventional constructions of femininity. Pirkko Markula observes that the multiple and fragmented Deleuzian rhizomic model, in which ideas flow in many directions rather than settle into binary opposites, allows for a construction of femininity unrelated to masculinity. Dancers' observations about enjoying their bodies while belly dancing privately and about feeling able to shift between different modes of femininity do suggest that a kind of femininity on their own terms is possible. Belly dancing in front of an audience, however, is complicated because of the representational resonance attached to the belly dancer. Playful performances of exaggerated femininity in these situations may be one way in which these participants divert judgemental gazes.

Talking about belly dancing, an activity not generally associated with New Zealand, also became a different way for participants to articulate their ideas about being New Zealanders. Their talk about 'New Zealand culture' suggested that they identified some of the multiple cultural practices in which they engaged as having a 'Kiwi' or 'New Zealand' component, and frequently referred back to wild landscapes, a rural, rugged past, and the idea of the capable, ingenious 'Kiwi' when describing things they thought were particularly 'New Zealand.' The non-Maori participants – the majority – indicated frustration with what they perceived as a lack of informal music and dance performance opportunities for non-Maori/Pasifika in this culture, which belly dance seemed to supply. These participants did indicate some familiarity with Maori cultural practices, with quite a few referring to themselves as 'Pakeha', including one of the oldest participants, but it seemed that they thought of Maori culture as something separate from, or additional to, wider 'New Zealand' culture, to which they, as non-Maori, could not have access. Interestingly, since it appeared that belly dancing in New Zealand, although definitely perceived as a Middle Eastern activity, is strongly influenced by North American teachers and their approaches, some participants used talk about belly dance to criticise United States dominance in world cultures. Many indicated some ambivalence towards present-day practices of the dance in global contexts and clearly gave serious thought to how best they

could reconcile their consciousness of issues such as cultural appropriation with their desire to belly dance. Kiwi Iwi's reworking of American Tribal Style belly dance into a 'globalised' hybrid consciously refuses the label 'American.' Their reworking of the style to express a specifically Pacific identity reflects critical responses to 'cultural imperialism' and celebrates resistance to United States domination while operating within its norms. Others used their facility with belly dancing movements to resist new styles of social dancing from the United States that they did not like. Most of these participants seemed unconcerned about respecting North American culture, but very concerned about being respectful towards Middle Eastern and North African cultures.

For some participants, studying with and emulating dancers from the Middle East wherever possible, to produce a more 'authentic' representation, allowed them to feel more comfortable about their involvement with the dance. Meyda Yegenoglu (1998: 121) notes that this sort of "liberal desire" to replace stereotypes or misrepresentations with "the true and authentic" remains "the very product of Orientalist hegemony." Belly dancers who reject 'authenticity' in favour of conscious hybridity in the form of fusion, especially where both 'Middle Eastern' and 'Orientalist fantasy' elements are muted in favour of an expression of a local identity, like Kiwi Iwi, seem better able to circumvent the problems of Orientalism. However, because they are still belly dancers, they continue to be seen as representative of Middle Eastern Others; moreover, in these styles, 'Others' remain merely "source(s) of inspiration" (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003: 31). Yegenoglu does not offer a way out of the interdependent relationship between Western constructions of the Orient and Eastern responses to them within Orientalism. Non-indigenous belly dancers thus remain in a problematic position, caught between the pleasures of escapist fantasies, body movement and performance, and appropriation.

Participants in globalised belly dance must negotiate dominant views among belly dancers that identify both multiplicity and particularisation within the dance form, against the lasting effects of colonialism and, in particular, the "unconscious memory" of Orientalism, which positions belly dancing as an exotic activity practiced by undifferentiated Middle Eastern others (Yegenoglu 1998: 72). Belly dancers can use their knowledge of movement, music and costuming conventions to identify new hybrid modes of belly dance that are not intended to be accurate (or even fantastical) representations of Middle Eastern or North African dance, but a non-belly dancer seeing the same performance will probably see the Orient. This is particularly

the case if the dance is described as ‘belly dance’ and features associated with belly dance, such as an exposed abdomen, are present. Conversely, a belly dancer may strive to represent ‘authentic’ dance styles that are rooted in a particular set of unfamiliar cultural conventions, such as the Egyptian folkloric *melaya leff* dance, and be recognised as doing so only by other belly dancers. In both cases, according to Yegenoglu’s reading of Orientalism, belly dancers remain trapped in and complicit with the discourse; in the first case, they conjure Orientalist fantasies (whether they mean to or not) and in the second, their attention to being “morally correct” and ‘getting it right’ involves them in a “colonial gesture” (Yegenoglu 1998: 120).

Yegenoglu (1998: 71-72) observes that contradictions in Orientalist discourse – as in new, positive reinterpretations of the harem, or new acceptance of historical male belly dancing – do not challenge Orientalism’s hegemony, merely rearticulate it in different ways. But, to turn her assertion on its head, as much as “each intersection, each disruption, each displacement” fixes Orientalism in place as a unified discourse, it also multiplies and complicates it (ibid: 72). It is in this multiplicity and complexity that we can find potential to think about belly dance’s slippery hybridity, and consider ways that belly dancers may engage with multiple ideas of self and other, that maintain a line back into recognition that the dance remains representative of both a fantasised Orient and a material Middle East.

Marwan Kraidy’s (2005: 158) theory of critical transculturalism aims to recouple cultural and social politics at the state level. But his tentative vision of a ‘hybridity without guarantees’ that recognises both hybridity and inequalities of power, and works with them, can also be explored within belly dance contexts. It appeared that many of the participants in this study were conscious of and worried about cultural appropriation, but at the same time experienced a kind of acculturation due to their involvement with the globalised form of belly dance, which gave them a sense of entitlement to movements and conventions that now felt normal and pleasant to do. They are acculturated not to Middle Eastern/North African cultures, but to globalised belly dance culture, which is not solely a ‘Western’ fantasy but a transcultural hybrid into which all interested parties may have input. However, it remains a ‘Western’ dominated culture.

The blurring of lines between self/Other, us/them, east/west can occur without neglecting difference and inequality in globalised belly dance’s synthetic culture, and by extension, other cultures. New Zealanders live with a model of biculturalism that (at least

nominally) accords Maori special status as the indigenous inhabitants of the land. They may be well-placed to model forward-thinking responses to belly dancing that identify and engage with the practitioners of indigenous belly dance as *tangata whenua*²¹³ within belly dancing culture, and continuously return to and critically renegotiate the difficult terrain of Orientalism.

²¹³ Literally, “people of the land”; indigenous people. The Maori term carries implications of such people being hosts, rather than visitors, who retain customary rights to and trusteeship of that land and its resources.

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FIGURES



Figure 1: Myself, dancing on grass at the Brooklands Gala



Figure 2: Globalised belly dance at Oasis Dance Camp. Clockwise from left: dancers dressed for workout in class; partying in Gulf-style dresses; workout gear customised for belly dancers; Berber-inspired fantasy henna.



Figure 3: Pupils of Auckland teacher Cecil Hall in an Orientalist fantasy dance, 1929 (Cecil Hall Collection) From Cherie Devliotis (2005) *Dancing with delight, footprints of the past: dance and dancers in early twentieth century Auckland*, Polygraphia, Auckland. Reprinted with kind permission of Auckland City Libraries, Special Collections.

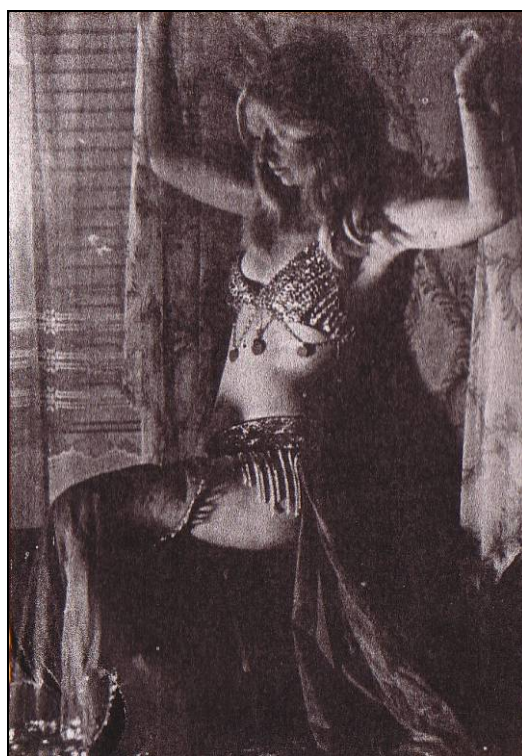


Figure 4: Hamilton dancer Anne Kalnins in 1976.

「ラッカーサ・ウェスト」とは
世界最大級のベリーダンスの祭典、「ラッカーサ・ウェスト」。例年3月にカリフォルニア郊外で行われるこのイベントは、数え切れないダンサーたちのステージ、有名ダンサーによるワークショップ、専門ショップが集まったバザーでのショッピング、のいずれもが楽しめる夢のようなフェスティバル。ここ数年は日本からの参加者も増加傾向にあり、ベリーダンスに興味がある人なら一度は行ってみたい、憧れのイベントになりつつあります。今回はケーシー・チャイはじめ、日本人にもおなじみのダンサーの参加も決定しているようです。



今年こそ!

ラッカーサ・ウェストに参加しちゃおう! 2008



RAKKASAH WEST

ツアー参加で効率よく楽しもう
この「ラッカーサ・ウェスト」をゆつくり堪能できるツアーが、PTSよりついに登場しました! 会場から徒歩圏内のホテルに宿泊し、現地到着後はフリーなので、自分の好きなようにイベントを楽しめます。また、せっかくのアメリカだし、観光も楽しみたい! という方のために、サンフランシスコでの市内観光もあります。
会場がある地区は治安があまり良くないので、今までは個人旅行で行っても現地の日本人同士でタクシーをチャーターしたりと、不便もありましたが、ツアーに参加することで、そんな心配も一切無用! 行ってみないと、個人ではなかなかという人におすすめのツアー。まさにベリーダンス三昧の三日間を思いっきり過ごすことができます。まずは気軽に問い合わせしてみよう!

株式会社PTS

「ラッカーサ・ウェスト」を楽しむ旅

2008年
3月14日(金) ~ 18日(火)
3泊5日

- 料金: 148,000円
※大会参加費が別途かかります。(一人部屋追加料金 18,000円)
- 最小催行人数10名(添乗員はつきません)
- 食事条件: 朝食 (3回のみ)
- ホテル: コートヤードバイ・マリOTT バレホ
- 航空会社: ノースウエスト航空
別途、空港税、燃油サーチャージが必要となります (概算35,000円予定)

ここを
チェック!

- ☆世界最大級のベリーダンス・フェスティバル「ラッカーサ・ウェスト」に3日間参加
- ☆会場から徒歩圏内のホテルに宿泊(カリフォルニア州バレホ)
- ☆到着日にはサンフランシスコの市内観光つき ☆希望者には別途、旅行の手配あり

【旅行企画・実施】

株式会社PTS (JTBグループ) コーポレート事業部
(国土交通大臣登録旅行業第39号) 総合旅行取扱管理者 桑谷雅美
ベリーダンススクール: 石井 (不在の際は、藤田または松島まで)
〒171-0033 東京都豊島区高田3-13-2 高田馬場TSビル
03-5950-5921
FAX: 03-5950-6191 E-mail: takumi@ptsnavi.jp
<http://www.pts.co.jp>

ベリーダンスの旅はお任せください!

株式会社PTSは、JTBグループの強みを生かし、ベリーダンスに興味を持つすべての方へ、それぞれのニーズに応えられる旅行会社を目指しています。世界中のベリーダンス情報を収集しながら、現在現意勉強中です! アメリカはもちろん、エジプト、トルコ、韓国など魅力的なツアーを企画中です。教室単位でのツアーから個人の手配旅行まで、いかなうにもアレンジいたしますので、まずはお気軽にご連絡ください!

お問合せ電話番号 03-5950-5921



ベリーダンス・ウェスト
石井

Figure 5: Japanese advertisement for tours to Rakkasah West, a belly dance festival in the United States. From *Bellydance Japan*, Vol 2, Winter 2008.

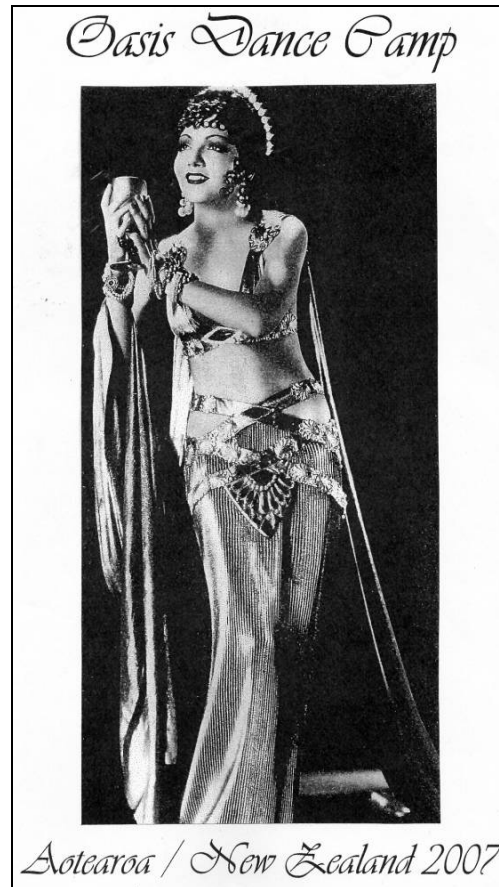


Figure 6: Oasis Dance Camp manual cover.



Figure 7: "Harem" solution to unwanted decor, Oasis Dance Camp.



Figure 8: Paua, poi, Pacific colours and fantasy *moko* in the Pacific fusion belly dance of Kiwi Iwi



Figure 9: Embodying cultural alterity: *melaya leff* performance



Fig 10: Kiwi Iwi evoke retro Kiwiana and traditional Maori performance costuming in a dance to 'Tangaroa' by Maori musician Tiki Tane.

APPENDICES

Appendix I
Letter to potential participants

Dear

I would like to invite you to take part in my masters' thesis research into belly dancing in New Zealand.

I have been studying belly dance for nearly 10 years and currently teach at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance in Christchurch. In July I began work on my thesis, "Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity, transculture", through the Cultural Studies programme at the University of Canterbury. My supervisors are Rosemary Du Plessis and Nabila Jaber of the School of Sociology and Anthropology.

I am particularly interested in interviewing teachers who have been involved in this dance form for many years, or dancers who have (or had) influential schools or troupes, to get a picture of the ways belly dancing is practiced and has developed here over the years.

I attach an information sheet with more details about the project and contact details for myself and my supervisors.

I would be very keen to interview you for this project, either in person, by telephone or by email. Please let me know by October 1 2007 if you would like to be involved.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Regards

Brigid Kelly
School of Culture, Literature and Society
University of Canterbury

Appendix II

Text included in Oasis Dance Camp newsletter sent to registered participants prior to camp

Brigid Kelly, aka Zumarrad, a teacher at the School of Contemporary Belly Dance in Christchurch, is writing her MA thesis on the ways belly dance is practiced and experienced in New Zealand. She will be quietly observing proceedings at Oasis (as well as participating herself) as part of her research, and will introduce herself to you all at the beginning of camp. Please feel free to approach her with any questions or feedback you have – she would love to hear your stories and ideas about belly dance, and about your experiences at Oasis Aotearoa.

Appendix III

University of Canterbury Cultural Studies Programme

Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity, transculture

INFORMATION SHEET

(for anonymous participants)

You are invited to participate in the above-named research project. The aim of this project is to explore belly dancing in New Zealand, how it fits into the lives of New Zealanders, how it is taught and practiced, and what benefits it offers.

Your involvement in this project will involve participation in an informal one to one interview, to be carried out either in person, over the telephone or via email depending what is most convenient for you. You will be asked about your own involvement in belly dance and that of your students (if you have them). The interview may cover areas such as the history of the dance in New Zealand as you understand it, your own learning experiences, changes you have seen in belly dancing in New Zealand, and what appeals to you personally about this dance form. The interview will last up to approximately one hour.

The results of the project will be included in my masters thesis and potentially in subsequent publications (such as journal articles and/or a PhD thesis), but you are assured of anonymity and the complete confidentiality of all data gathered during this investigation: participants' identities will not be made public without their consent. Each participant will have the opportunity to view a transcript or edited overview of the contents of their interview, and to make any corrections or clarifications. To ensure anonymity, identifying information will be securely stored. Only I will have access to this information. To preserve anonymity where requested, any information that could identify you will be modified in my masters thesis and any subsequent publications.

You may withdraw your participation, including withdrawal of any information you have provided, at any time.

The project is being carried out by Brigid Kelly, masters student in the University of Canterbury Cultural Studies programme, under the supervision of Rosemary Du Plessis and Nabila Jaber, as research towards her masters thesis. They can be contacted by email and will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

Brigid Kelly: zumarrad@gmail.com

Rosemary Du Plessis: rosemary.duplessis@canterbury.ac.nz

Nabila Jaber: nabila.jaber@canterbury.ac.nz

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury School of Sociology and Anthropology Ethics Committee.

Appendix IV

University of Canterbury Cultural Studies Programme

Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity, transculture

INFORMATION SHEET

(for troupes and organisations)

You are invited to participate in the above-named research project. The aim of this project is to explore belly dancing in New Zealand, how it fits into the lives of New Zealanders, how it is taught and practiced, and what benefits it offers.

Your involvement in this project will involve participation in an informal interview, to be carried out either in person, over the telephone or via email depending what is most convenient for you. You will be asked about your organisation's involvement in the belly dance scene in New Zealand, particularly about your feelings about what you do, your own learning experiences, what you feel is unique about your troupe or organisation, changes in the way you teach, promote or perform belly dance, and what appeals to you personally about this dance form as you practice it. The interview will last up to approximately one hour.

The results of the project will be included in my masters thesis and potentially in subsequent publications (such as journal articles and/or a PhD thesis), but you are assured of the complete confidentiality of all data gathered during this investigation. Your responses will **not** be anonymous, as I would like to refer to your troupe/organisation in the thesis, but you will have the opportunity to view a transcript or edited overview of the contents of your interview, and to make corrections or clarifications, before the material is released for use. To ensure confidentiality, identifying information will be securely stored. Only I will have access to this information. You can choose whether you would like to be identified in the thesis by your own name or a pseudonym.

You may withdraw your participation, including withdrawal of any information you have provided, at any time.

The project is being carried out by Brigid Kelly, masters student in the University of Canterbury Cultural Studies programme, under the supervision of Rosemary Du Plessis and Nabila Jaber, as research towards her masters thesis. They can be contacted by email and will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

Brigid Kelly: zumarrad@gmail.com

Rosemary Du Plessis: rosemary.duplessis@canterbury.ac.nz

Nabila Jaber: nabila.jaber@canterbury.ac.nz

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury School of Sociology and Anthropology Ethics Committee.

Appendix V

University of Canterbury Cultural Studies Programme

Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity,
transculture

CONSENT FORM

anonymous research

I have been presented with a copy of the information sheet for the above project. I have read this and understand the description of the project and my rights as a participant. I thereby agree to participate as a subject in this research project. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and that my requests for confidentiality and anonymity will be preserved at all times.

In signing this I consent to the use of material which appears in my interview transcript being used in Brigid Kelly's masters thesis and possible academic papers based on this research. I understand that I will be offered the opportunity to check this transcript before this occurs.

Name: (print)

Signature:

Date:

Contact telephone number or email address:

Brigid Kelly
Masters student
School of Culture, Literature and Society
University of Canterbury
Email: zumarrad@gmail.com
Tel: (03) 377-3206

Appendix VI

University of Canterbury Cultural Studies Programme

Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity,
transculture

CONSENT FORM

for troupe/organisation

I have been presented with a copy of the information sheet for the above project. I have read this and understand the description of the project and my rights as a participant. I thereby agree to participate as a subject in this research project. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and that my requests for confidentiality will be preserved at all times.

In signing this I consent to the use of material which appears in my interview transcript, along with the name of my troupe or organisation where appropriate, being used in Brigid Kelly's masters thesis and possible academic papers based on this research. I understand that I will be offered the opportunity to check this transcript before this occurs.

Name: (print)

Signature:

Date:

Contact telephone number or email address:

Brigid Kelly
Masters student
School of Culture, Literature and Society
University of Canterbury
Email: zumarrad@gmail.com
Tel: (03) 377-3206

Appendix VII

University of Canterbury Cultural Studies Programme Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity, transculture

INTERVIEW QUESTION LIST

The following list of questions will be used to direct unstructured interviews with a variety of New Zealand belly dance teachers and practitioners. *Not all questions will be used for every interviewee.*

For all participants, where relevant

How, when and where did you become involved in belly dance?

Why belly dancing?

Who taught you? What kind of information and ideas did they share with you? (*consider also: cultural art vs fun for all women etc*)

What did you know, or believe, about belly dancing when you first started?

In what ways (if any) has that changed?

When you think about where belly dance comes from, what images come to mind?

What is your favourite style of belly dance and why?

How do you feel that belly dance has affected your life? (*consider also wider things like décor, zaghareet to hail friends etc. Responses from friends and family*)

How does belly dancing relate to how you see yourself as a woman (or man)?

How do you think it fits into *being* a New Zealander or person living in New Zealand?

In what ways (if at all) do you adapt your belly dance practice to New Zealand customs and ideas?

Do you have a dance name? Why/why not? What does it mean to you?

In what ways has your dance practice or understanding changed over time?

If you are a teacher:

Why did you begin to teach?

What kind of people do you teach? Where do you teach?

What style of belly dance do you teach?

What resources (books, DVDs, CDs, websites, people etc) have you used /do you use to help you learn more about belly dancing?

What resources do you share with, or recommend to, students? How do you go about this?

If you are a member of a performance group:

What things make your dance group special? What are your influences?

What are the benefits to you of dancing in a formal troupe?

What kind of feedback do you get from audiences?

How has your performance work changed and developed over time?

If you are a visitor to New Zealand attending a dance event:

What are your impressions of New Zealand belly dance?

Why did you choose to come to New Zealand to attend this event?

Appendix VIII

University of Canterbury Cultural Studies Programme

Belly dancing in New Zealand: identity, hybridity, transculture

Focus group

The intent of this focus group is to facilitate discussion among participants regarding their physical experiences of belly dancing.

The following quotes have been gleaned from interview participants. Discuss your responses:

“It just feels so nice when you do it.”

“I’m not Middle Eastern. [But], you know I do have that kind of Middle Eastern kind of [‘thing’]— when I dance, it just comes out. When it’s the right music and I’m in the right setting... it’s not rude and it’s not in your face, it’s not extreme, it’s just that really subtle little thing and – it doesn’t feel like a western thing. It just feels like a Middle Eastern thing.”

“It feels much more holistic for me and a more natural style now.”

“Belly Dance has ...given me a spiritual dimension and in some way fills a role that being part of a religion would otherwise give. The focus, intensity and reward on a spiritual level are all part of it.”

“As the movements become more natural the dance has the ability to cleanse emotionally, and feed the soul, burn up stress within the body, and calm the spirit. ... I dance to keep myself emotionally, and physically in balance. When we first learn to dance this may not be the driving force, but I suspect instinctively we understand this need to use our bodies creatively to free the spirit and create harmony in our bodies.”

“It’s a really sexy sensuous dance and I’ve loved that. It’s made me feel sensuous and sexy and beautiful and yeah, capable as well.”

What is a movement you really like and why? How does it feel?

What movement do you like least or less? Why?

Can you remember a movement that was hard at first that you now find easier to do? Discuss.

What do you feel and notice when you are onstage? Eg, Do you notice the feeling of lights, sound of music, the audience, feeling of the floor?

What do you feel dancing alone, or with friends offstage?

How do you “get” a movement – mirror, feel in the body, etc?